

Jason (Spaceman) Jones



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This book is dedicated to AOS,
the man who inspired the story.



Chapter One

On his eleventh birthday, Jason was given what he always wanted, his own set of colouring pencils, the ones with the different coloured heads so he could tell at a glance which colour was which, with a sturdy metal box to keep them in.

Jason loved playing with his pencils, and could easily while away a whole day just doodling rather than drawing, mindlessly playing at being an artist, especially on those wet Sunday afternoons when there seemed to be nothing else to do.

It was during one of these wet afternoons when something strange happened. Half awake, and kind of half asleep, not really conscious, but not paying any attention either, Jason suddenly found to his astonishment the red pencil he was using started moving all by itself. He was still holding it but the pencil seemed to have a will of its own. It wanted to scrawl and scribble and scrape all over the paper, so much so that Jason thought he was going to run out of space. The pencil kept doing this until he yanked it off the paper; only then did it stop. Jason looked at the paper and gasped. It was some kind of drawing he'd never seen before, all these lines and curves, with squiggles everywhere, lots of them, all going this way and that. It didn't look like a picture at all, more of a random mess if anything, and certainly very different from what he would normally draw.

Dumbfounded, Jason scratched his head, looked at the paper, looked at the pencil, and tried to work out how he had done it. Did it really move by itself? Or was he pushing it, not really aware he was doing that? He looked at the pencil again. It didn't look very special, just an ordinary pencil, yet it seemed to have a life of its own as if it was magical.

To test his theory, Jason fetched another sheet of paper, a big clean one, making sure it was flat, and put the same pencil he was using in the middle, then let it go, thinking it would move by itself. But it didn't.

'Go on then,' he shouted, as if trying to coax it to do something without his help. Still it didn't move: it lay there motionless, inanimate.

Jason, now confused, waited a bit longer sure it was going to move again. Yet no matter how long he waited, the pencil wouldn't budge, not even a millimetre. So Jason picked it up, looked at it again, and decided he would give it some encouragement by helping it stand up straight, its point touching the paper. No, still it wouldn't move. Perhaps the trick lay in helping it to move by pushing it a bit, just to get it going. So Jason held it very lightly between finger and thumb and closed his eyes. He imagined the thing was moving, creating huge swirling patterns on the big sheet, lots of wavy lines, lots of squiggles here and there. In the corner a poor attempt at drawing a house; in another corner a little cat, and in another the figure of a boy. Then the pencil would go to another corner and start drawing a tiger, a big one ready to leap off the paper. But Jason had to tell himself to stop being foolish because pencils don't work like that. Or do they?

It was then that Jason realised, unbeknown to him, the pencil had stopped moving. In fact, it stopped awhile ago as if somehow it ran out of momentum. And to prove it, he opened his eyes and couldn't believe what he saw. Right there before him were lines and lines of red markings all over the sheet. And in each corner there was something vaguely resembling what he had imagined, or thought he had imagined. In one corner a cat. In the other a big tiger with its front paws out as if ready to pounce. In the other what looked like a house. And in the other, a little boy. Who this last one was supposed to be Jason did not know. As roughly drawn as it was, it certainly didn't look like anybody he recognised. And when he started looking at it in greater detail he realised that all these things had been drawn by one continuous line which seemed to have no beginning or end. Upon closer examination, he could not tell where the pencil started drawing this miraculous picture, not even in the centre of the paper where he first placed the pencil, as if the beginning and the end had come together like one big circle that has no beginning or end.

'Wow,' little Jason gushed. This was something really amazing. He was going to show it to everybody. But would they believe him if he told them the picture drew itself? He didn't think so. That sounded ridiculous. Who ever heard of a picture drawing itself? But if he told them he drew it, they probably wouldn't believe him either. And he didn't believe it himself anyway, because he certainly didn't feel responsible for making

it. Even so, it was definitely worth showing, just to get an opinion.

He rushed to his mother in the kitchen who was busy cooking the dinner and said, 'Look Mum, what do you think of this?' he asked with a big smile on his face.

'My, that is unusual,' she replied, taking it from him to get a better look. 'Did you do this all by yourself?'

Jason thought for a second or two then nodded.

'Are you sure?' she asked him with a quizzical expression.

Jason simply nodded again.

As if not believing her precious little child who never previously demonstrated any great skill in art, she held it up to the light trying to see where a line started and where it ended. She too couldn't and gave up, shaking her head in disbelief.

'I think you had better show this to your father when he comes home from the club.'

'I will,' Jason replied, excited, having tapped into a talent he didn't know he possessed.

Okay, he might have told a little white lie, but how was he to explain to his mother it wasn't just him who created the picture. As far as he was concerned he was holding the pencil, he was the only person in the room, so it must have been him who drew it. That's what he was going to tell everyone.

Then he heard his dad come home. Before he could even get his foot through the floor, Jason ran up to him with his picture and said, 'Look, look what I've done, Dad,' and waved it in his face.

'What's all this then?' his dad asked, trying to get through the door.

'It's mine. I drew it.'

'Really, son?' His dad took the picture off him and held it at arm's length to get a better look, and said, 'Well, that is unusual, isn't it?' almost repeating his wife's words. 'You did this all by yourself?'

'Of course I did.'

'You sure you're telling the truth?' Jason nodded. 'Okay, if you're not fibbing prove it by drawing me another picture just like this.'

Jason's father gave him the picture back and patted the boy's head, ruffling his blond mop of hair. He smiled at him. His mother came into the hallway and asked Jason to tidy up the mess he made on the dining room table, and put his things away as tea was nearly ready.

'Okay, Mum. Then after tea I'm going to draw you an even bigger and better picture.'

'You just do that, son. But first do what your mother said.'

'Oh, okay,' he moaned, and got the table ready for tea.

Afterwards, Jason couldn't wait to try his experiment again. This time

he decided he was going to use a bigger sheet of paper and a different pencil, just to see if it would make any difference. He laid out a fresh sheet on his bedroom floor, making sure it was flat, and rolled up his sleeves. He picked a purple pencil, tested it had a good sharp point, and held it right in the centre of the paper. Nothing happened. It didn't seem to want to do anything, making no movement whatsoever. Jason pressed the point down harder, squeezing the pencil as if he was squeezing the life out of it. But still it refused to budge. Then he remembered what happened the first time. The pencil moved when he wasn't looking. So he turned his head away and pretended he wasn't, even though he could still see it out of the corner of his eye. But it still didn't move.

'Okay, then, so how do I make you work? What do I have to do?' Perhaps if I close my eyes, he mused to himself. So he closed his eyes and concentrated really hard to get the thing to move. He waited and waited. Then opened his eyes again only to find a blank sheet of paper staring back at him. He wanted to give up in frustration. If he did that he would look stupid in front of his parents. He told them he was going to do it again, and he was determined he would. He was going to come out with something even bigger and better.

What seemed like at least an hour must have passed when he was about to give up before he remembered that all he had to do was to dream it and it would become real, just like last time. Besides, the big dinner had made him feel kind of sleepy, and he was practically nodding off anyway when he suddenly felt the pencil start to move. He kept his eyes tightly shut and imagined he was drawing a big landscape with lots of rolling hills, massive trees springing up out of the ground, and flowers blowing in the breeze. He felt this tremendous urge to continue, to keep building up the picture, letting his imagination go wild. He put in clouds hovering over the landscape, a big, bright sun trying to shine through, lighting up the land below. Then he imagined horses galloping through fields, their hooves kicking up clumps of grass and earth. As all this imagery built up inside him, Jason felt it was at the same time being conveyed to his pencil through his hand; but he wasn't moving his hand, something else was. It was moving by itself. All he had to do was to think of something, some inanimate object, and it would appear on the paper. Or a live object like a horse, and there it was. As soon as he took the pencil off the paper the energy stopped. His hand went dead, as if no longer possessing life. It also felt strangely cold, not warm and lively as before. When he stopped and opened his eyes, he could see exactly what he had drawn. There it was, like how he imagined it in his head, a big picture of trees, horses and clouds, again all drawn with one continuous line with no beginning or end, except where he deliberately took his hand

off. Now would his parents believe him? He couldn't wait to show them.

Running into the front room all excited, he brandished his new creation and shouted jubilantly, 'Look Mum, look Dad. I've done it again.'

His father, busy watching the football on the telly, turned to see his animated son waving a picture. It was moving wildly like a flag on a windy day.

'Calm down, son. Now what's all this about? Why are you so excited?'

'I told you I could do it,' Jason responded with glee, his hair bouncing all over his face.

'Well then, let's have a look. We can't look at it if you keep waving it around like that, can we?'

His dad took the picture from him to get a better look.

'Hmm,' he murmured, a deep and sober murmur, and looked at the picture; first this way, then that, upside down and back to front, as if he didn't know what to make of it or even if there was a right way up. It was all squiggly lines, curves and sinuous movements like a spider had run amok with purple silk, leaving all these traces behind. He could just make out the horses, trees, clouds and a big sun shining in the sky.

He called out to his wife, 'What do you make of this, eh?'

He handed her the drawing, the little boy looking all agog at his mother for confirmation that her son was clever and had a real talent.

'Well, well, well,' she said. 'Now that is something, isn't it?' She too was turning it this way and that, also not sure what to make of it. 'Why don't you take it to school tomorrow and show your art teacher. See what he has to say.'

'Okay, Mum,' he said, and took the picture back with glowing pride. 'He may even ask me to draw another one.'

'He might just do that, son,' his dad chimed. 'Now, why don't you run off to bed. You look like you could do with a good night's sleep.'

'Okay, Dad.'

'And don't forget to brush your teeth,' he shouted after him.

Chapter Two

Jason, upon awaking the next morning, couldn't wait to go to school. He wanted to tell all his friends about this great talent he discovered, and felt it would make him stand out from the rest, especially in art class.

Jason was never much of an artist; he pretended to be one but couldn't even draw a car without it looking all out of proportion. He seemed to spend half his life in a dream, always dreaming of big things, with high hopes and unattainable goals. His head was always in the clouds; that's why they called him Spaceman, or Jason the Spaceman. His friends at school teased him because they knew he would never amount to much. For one thing, his feet weren't firmly planted on the ground. He needed to be brought back down to earth, and pretty quick, otherwise he would get lost up there somewhere and be all alone as there was no one else up there on Cloud Cuckoo Land. He needed to get to grips with reality, work hard at school and get good grades. Then what was he going to do? Follow in the footsteps of his father and become an accountant? No, he wanted to be an astronaut and live up to his name.

On the way to school he heard someone shout out 'Spaceman!' It was Charlie, his old school friend. He met him last year when they first started school together, and have been friends ever since. They were in the same class and always sat together.

Charlie finally caught up with him. 'What you been up to?' he asked, trying to get his breath back. His old school friend wasn't very fit and needed desperately to shed a few pounds. It didn't help either that Jason, although quite short for his age, was taking long strides, walking like he was making big steps for mankind this morning.

'Hey, Charlie, guess what happened to me yesterday?'

‘What?’ Charlie huffed, still out of breath.

‘I found I could draw.’

‘So? Everyone can draw, can’t they?’ he countered, hardly impressed.

‘No, I mean, really draw. You know, like a real artist. You wait till I show Old Rennie my pictures. He’s gonna be amazed.’

Charlie looked oddly at Jason as they cut through the playground to get to the main entrance of Summerby School, unsure what was going through his friend’s head.

Although the building was fairly new, it looked old and dilapidated like it had been left out in the rain too long, with paint peeling here, iron railings showing signs of rust over there, and windows that were grimy from the outside, making it all poky inside as if the sunlight couldn’t get through. The Council never seemed to have any extra money to keep the school in good condition these days. The teachers didn’t care much either, nor did Mr Martin, the headmaster, who didn’t even look like he knew where he was half the time, still sozzled from the night before, and probably couldn’t see anything under his big bushy eyebrows. The only person who did seem to care was their old art teacher, Mr Rennie. He had been there from day one, as soon as the school opened, over twenty odd years ago. Barely in his fifties, he spoke with a typical southern accent, but very posh, almost like royalty, and loved to roll his R’s whenever he spoke, especially on his favourite subject; the history of art, particularly the artists of London from the early 15th to the 20th century. And Jason seemed to not mind Old Rennie, as all the kids called him, and could listen to him all day. In fact, he usually spent most of the art classes huddled over his desk just mindlessly doodling away as Old Rennie waffled on about Turner or Constable, or whoever it was that painted *The Haywain*, something little Jason didn’t care for as it was all a bit too grown up for him. Mr Rennie had such a turn of phrase at times, you couldn’t help but be taken in by the sound of his voice; he could make the blandest picture seem interesting just by the words he used and the way he pronounced them.

As soon as assembly was over, the first lesson of the day was art. Jason brought both pictures he drew yesterday. He was eager to show Mr Rennie because the old man really did know something about the subject, and would be able to tell little Jason if they were any good or not.

After class settled down and all the pupils were seated, Mr Rennie began to ask each boy in turn what they thought of the last lesson (they had to do a still life portrait; a vase with daffodils, using the light, what little there was, coming from the windows shining on the subject). Well, Atkins, the first boy at the front of the class, thought it was ‘boring,’ and ‘not much cop,’ and other negative remarks, making it quite apparent he

wasn't impressed at all. But Warren, the boy sitting next to him, thought it was a 'good idea,' and 'could we do it again' as he knew practice makes perfect.

'Excellent idea, my lad,' Old Rennie retorted. (He always used the words 'my lad' for those pupils he favoured or believed were more positive towards his class. Others, the ones he deemed to be negative, or who considered art to be a waste of time, he always referred to as 'my wastrel'—about half the class—so he said it quite a lot.) When Jason put his hand up to speak and offer his opinion, Mr Rennie called him 'my lad' so Jason knew he was in his good books and would be more inclined to see his drawings and give a reasoned opinion.

'I also would like to do the same again, sir,' he offered.

'Good, my lad. And so we shall.'

'But sir?'

'Yes, what is it, Jones?'

'I was practicing drawing yesterday and came up with these.'

'And what are those, my lad?' Rennie asked, looking at the two sheets of paper Jason was holding up. From the front of the class they looked like doodling, not drawing, all spiralling lines and squiggles. 'Well, bring them up here, my lad. Let's take a closer look.'

Jason pushed back his chair and made his way proudly to the front of the class. No bad words could wipe away the big smile on his face.

Mr Rennie clutched both pictures and did exactly the same as Jason's parents; first turning them this way, then that, then putting them up to the light, and laying them flat on his desk. He put on his old spectacles, the pair he only wore for reading, and bent over the desk with his big eyes roaming all over the weird pencil lines.

'Very interesting,' he muttered to himself, pulling at the corners of his moustache. 'You drew these, my lad?' he asked him quizzically, not even looking at the boy, as if he couldn't take his eyes off them.

'Yes, sir,' Jason almost stammered as he had a horrible feeling that his teacher wasn't going to believe him either.

'You telling me you didn't copy them?'

'No, sir.'

'Are you sure?' he asked him, with a certain amount of scepticism which put little Jason on his guard.

'Yes, sir. Why?'

'Because I've seen this style before, yet for the life of me I can't remember where. Tell me how you did it.'

'Well, sir,' he stuttered, as if he was being accused of something he hadn't done, knowing full well the rest of the class were watching intently and in silence so they could hear every word. 'Well, sir ...'

‘Yes. Go on, my lad. We don’t have all day.’

‘Well, sir, I mean I didn’t What I meant to say was they sort of drew themselves.’

The rest of the class started laughing. How could a drawing draw itself? How ridiculous!

‘Quiet!’ Mr Rennie shouted at the rest of the class. Everyone went very quiet indeed. ‘Explain, laddie,’ he demanded, always reverting to the term ‘laddie’ whenever he was losing patience.

‘Well, sir, they sort of came out of me, but I wasn’t really doing anything. I was just doodling.’

‘Did they really? How very interesting. Show me,’ he ordered, giving the poor boy a big sheet of paper and a pencil.

Jason put pencil to paper; then closed his eyes and said: ‘Like this. I closed my eyes, let my hand do what it wanted to do, and when I opened my eyes, there it was.’

And sure enough, there it was, a little squiggle, a sort of animal, if looked at in a certain way, again drawn with a continuous line and so finely executed it could have been done by a draughtsman. If Old Rennie hadn’t seen it for himself he would have disbelieved the young boy. But his eyes didn’t lie, nor could the other boys deny it; their jaws dropped and their eyes stared widely at Spaceman in disbelief.

‘You know what you’ve done there, don’t you, my lad?’

‘No, sir.’

‘It’s called automatic drawing. There’s only one artist I know who consistently used this technique. I can’t recall his name at present. But let me do some research tonight and I will get back to you on this tomorrow. But for the time being, may I borrow these drawings?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘Good lad,’ Mr Rennie uttered, patting the little boy on the head. ‘Now join the rest of the class and we’ll crack on with the rest of the lesson.’

Little Jason couldn’t wait to get home after school and tell his parents what Old Rennie had said. The rest of the day at school seemed to go by in a blur, with his head not on his work at all but up in the clouds again, dreaming of all the things people would be saying about him in the future, this little boy from Walthamstow who suddenly showed a great talent, a little boy who would one day be a big boy, commanding huge respect from his peers, a boy who knew he had something in him somewhere and now believed he had found it.

He fairly skipped all the way home, his feet bouncing off the pavement, his blond mop of hair flouncing in the breeze, his little satchel banging against his back.

‘Mum,’ he shouted as soon as he got his foot through the door.

‘You’re home in good time,’ she shouted back from the kitchen, knowing that little Jason usually liked to dawdle on the way home. But not this evening.

He was so eager he ran into the kitchen and hugged his mother.

‘Guess what, Mum?’

‘What is it? What’s happened?’

‘Mr Rennie says I’ve got talent as an artist and he’s going to do some research on my work.’

‘Is he, indeed! Well, just you make sure you don’t get taken in by that man. But if he thinks you’ve got something then all well and good, just be careful.’

‘Why, Mum?’

‘I know that man. I met him at the Parents-Teachers Association last year, don’t you remember? I didn’t like him. He’s a bachelor, and I don’t have much respect for them. There’s always something odd about bachelors. Why isn’t he married? Doesn’t he like women? I don’t think he liked me! Look, I’m just saying, don’t get too carried away by what he says. You’re only young still, and you’ve got a lot to learn about other people.’

‘But why, Mum?’

‘Because sometimes they can be a bit misguided and lead young boys like you astray. Now, get changed, wash your hands. We will be eating shortly, as soon as your father gets home.’

Somewhat disappointed, Jason trudged his way upstairs. Why didn’t anyone have any faith in him? Okay, so he was still young, but he had stumbled across something which made sense to him and could make him famous like all those other people he read about and saw on the telly. They had made it, why couldn’t he? He just hoped his father would have a bit more faith in his own son.

At dinner Jason couldn’t help but be quiet. His father had a bad day at work and was in no mood for talking about such trivial things as what his son wanted to do when he grew up. Jason found himself playing with his food, idly twisting the heaps of spaghetti on his plate with his fork and twirling it round near to the brim. Seeing his mother frown at him made him stop. He wasn’t in a good mood either, and didn’t think he could eat anything at all.

‘Now Jason, eat up,’ she commanded.

‘Yes, Mum,’ he blurted and forced himself to eat another mouthful, then begged to be excused from the table as he had homework to do anyway.

In his bedroom, Jason snatched up his pencils, made some space on

his untidy floor and laid out a big sheet of paper. He selected a dark blue pencil this time and lay down on his stomach, holding the pencil lightly between his fingers, its point right in the middle of the sheet, and closed his eyes.

He let his mind drift, and was not really thinking about anything at all, allowing what ever images to pop up into his head, and let his right hand go. He could hear the pencil scrape across the paper and felt it move, again by its own volition. He seemed to enter a dream-world where he wasn't asleep—not really—and not fully awake either, but he was definitely dreaming, and felt he could control his dreams.

He saw in his mind's eye a wide blue sky with these huge structures suspended in it with no visible means of support. They were dark and grey, almost metallic. If they were to be polished up, he thought, they could reflect the sun very brightly. They reminded him of buildings, floating up there, static, not moving. Then these jets appeared, streaming across the sky like arrows with their tails on fire, slamming into the structures and demolishing them one by one, reducing them to fragments which fell out of the sky like snow falling to the ground, but exaggerated, reminding him of the snowy scenes he had seen on Christmas cards.

'It's Christmas!' Jason shouted jubilantly and jumped up. No it wasn't, his conscious mind told him. He opened his eyes, looked all around, and remembered where he was; in his bedroom. It was early evening, spring, with summer just around the corner. Then he looked down at the floor, and the sheet of paper, now covered with lines and swirling patterns. He could make out the structures he had seen in his 'dream' floating in the sky; the jets coming in from the left and dashing into them, bits falling away like snow. He could have sworn he was there, in that place, even if it was only for a minute or two, for it was so real. And he had a funny feeling that when he went to bed later he would be there again, in his dreams, this time for real.

Chapter Three

When Jason woke up the next morning he vaguely remembered some troubling dream. He couldn't recall much about it or whether he had been to the same place he drew in his picture. It was some strange, alien landscape where everything was archaic and distorted with buildings not made by hands, before people even existed. He also recalled that it felt familiar as if it was not the first time he had been there. There was also something to do with this odd, old man, kind of scruffy-looking, like he hadn't had a shave for weeks, or even brushed his hair, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Who was he? Certainly no relation of mine, Jason thought, and forgot about him. It was time to get ready for school.

'Now don't forget to take your homework,' his mother said as she straightened his tie. 'And don't talk to any strangers on the way there,' she reminded him, not for the first time either.

'No, Mum. I won't,' he replied glumly, not looking forward to school today as there was no art lesson, only boring old history, maths and science. Not even English! For he loved that subject, and playing around with words, discovering new ones, trying to increase his vocabulary, and would often spend a few hours just dipping into a dictionary, finding a word he didn't recognise and write it down, then try to pronounce it correctly, especially if it had more than three syllables. His dad had given him his old Chambers dictionary last year, already heavily thumbed and practically falling apart. The words were underlined with little ticks next to them where Jason believed he had mastered them and knew what they meant. For example, he loved the word 'superlative' and would often use it in conversation to impress the other kids at school. But he doubted he would be using it today, not in 'boring old history, maths and science.'

At school, Jason was taken by surprise when his history teacher told him first thing that Mr Rennie wanted to speak to him in private in his study, and could he promptly run up there now before his art teacher had his next class.

‘What on earth does he want to see me for?’ he asked himself. Then remembered what happened yesterday. Perhaps it was something important and the old man couldn’t wait to tell him. He gingerly knocked on the teacher’s door and heard one distinct word, ‘Come,’ and entered to find Mr Rennie sprawled behind his desk with a look of satisfaction on his face.

‘Ah, my lad. There you are. Well come in, come in. Close the door. Sit down.’

Jason looked all around him. He had never been in the teacher’s quarters before, and this room was stuffy and old just like the teacher. But everywhere he looked, all he could see were books; book after book, some cramming the shelves on all four walls, others stacked up in the corners, and a big pile on the desk, so tall little Jason had to practically sit up just to be able to see his teacher.

‘Now, do you remember what I said yesterday, that I was going to do some research and tell you where I had seen pictures like yours before?’ he asked, his eyes firmly fixed on the little boy.

Jason nodded, intrigued.

‘Good. Splendid. Now, my lad, I made an interesting discovery when I got home last night. Did some digging around. Do you see these books?’ he asked him, pointing to the pile on his desk.

Again, Jason nodded, not sure where this was going.

‘They’re all art books from the last decade or so. And I found your style in a few of them. It matches an artist I am not that familiar with. But the interesting thing is, he was not just an artist. Or rather he was more than just an artist, art being his forte and incredibly gifted at that. Do you know what he really was?’

‘No,’ Jason responded, hardly able to get the word out.

‘He was a magician, my lad, a very unusual one at that. His name was Austin Osman Spare, a Londoner like yourself, born in Snow Hill, the son of a policeman, from a very poor background and remained poverty-stricken most of his life. He died about thirty years ago in relative obscurity. But he excelled in art at a very early age and published some interesting books which unfortunately I do not possess as they are incredibly rare now, rather sought after, impossible to obtain. Yet the interesting thing is his method of drawing exactly parallels yours, especially the way you showed me yesterday. He would go into a sort of trance and let the pen or pencil go where it willed and created some

fantastic pictures, which are now rather collectible. Because of his use of trance and drawing on the powers of the unconscious, he was seen as a precursor to the Surrealist movement of the Twenties and Thirties. Some artists of that school championed his work. Even so, he never got the recognition he deserved and is largely forgotten these days. His oeuvre is remarkable, incomparable with anyone else's. Now, I mention this because I have a theory, one that may sound very strange to your young tender ears, but I believe you have some connection with him, perhaps through your family, although I strongly suspect it is more likely a supernatural connection, shall we call it.' He paused and looked at the poor befuddled boy's face and realised he had been talking over his head, almost quite forgetting he was only an eleven year old. 'Have you ever heard of reincarnation?' he asked him.

'No,' Jason replied, shaking his head.

'It is a belief that when we die we come back again, in a different body, a different family, even a different country, and there are lots of people who hold this belief, some even claiming they were famous in their previous lifetimes, like Napoleon, Cleopatra, Caesar, Alexander the Great, etc. Of course there is no proof they were actually these people, yet this belief exists all over the world so it must have some basis in reality. Now, given that this artist-magician died a long time ago, it would not be surprising to discover that he had come back because he had a certain power and believed very much in reincarnation. Do you see what I am saying?'

The poor boy looked back at him even more confused.

His art teacher climbed out of his chair and leaned across his desk, staring directly into Jason's eyes, and said: 'He has come back as you!' Those words knocked the wind out of poor Jason.

What did the old man mean? I am me, aren't I? I can't be anybody else, he argued with himself.

'By that I mean,' he continued, 'he is within you. Somewhere deep down inside. On an unconscious level, of course, but there somewhere. And when you start drawing, like you did yesterday, you tap into him, into his power, and bring it to the surface.'

'His power? You mean, I am really a magician.'

'That's right, lad. A magician.'

'You mean, I can pull rabbits out of hats, that sort of thing?'

'No, my lad. A real magician. Not those fakes you see on TV. They're illusionists who do magic tricks. I am talking about real magic. Making things happen by will alone.'

'But how, sir?'

'Well, that's the big question, isn't it?' he guffawed, as if laughing at

some inner joke. ‘How do you make things happen by will alone? But that’s what magic is, causing changes to occur in conformity with your will. Now, I am no expert on the magic arts, but I was doing some reading on the subject last night. Got fascinated, and could not stop thinking about it, all the possibilities. For example,’ he said, getting up to cross the room, ‘it is my will that there be light in this room. So what do I do? I press this switch here,’ he said, flicking the light switch on the wall. ‘And hey, presto, there is light.’

Jason looked up at the flickering neon light. Was that a magical act? What was so magical about that? Even he could do that! Anybody could!

‘Now, I know what you’re thinking. But do you see how I have caused a change to occur by an act of will?’

Little Jason didn’t know whether to nod or shake his head. Yes, the light was on. Yes, it was no longer dark in the room, but that wasn’t real magic, not what he thought magic was or should be.

‘Now, you would believe it was more magical if I had caused the light to come on by itself or by non-physical means, wouldn’t you?’

Little Jason nodded.

‘Of course you would. But why try to use non-physical methods when perfectly physical methods will do the same job? For instance, I want to write and publish a book, just like one of these,’ he said, tapping the books on the desk behind him. ‘So what do I do? Do I call on angels and spirits to help me in my work? No, I put pen to paper, send the finished manuscript to the local publisher. They employ their printers, or spirits you could call them, to turn my manuscript into printed form, I get a proof copy back, check it conforms to my standards, and approve it. This then goes back to the publisher who employs printers and bookbinders, or spirits, and hey, presto, I have a book on the shelf. Again, I have caused a change to occur in conformity with my will, employing spirits, i.e. the publisher and printers, etc., to perform my bidding.’

Little Jason was just about to interrupt when the teacher frowned at him, signalling he hadn’t quite finished.

‘Now, the sort of magic our Spare was supposed to engage in was a very different kettle of fish altogether. What we might call sorcery. He had a method of obtaining his goals by drawing on the powers of the subconscious through a process of little designs called sigils based on what he called his “Alphabet of Desire.” These sigils embodied his desire. He would commit them to memory, charge them, then forget them through an act of repression, in the same way that we tend to blot out traumatic events because they’re too horrible to think about, and in that way he obtained his results.

‘Now, I don’t expect you to understand this, as you are still a young

boy. What I suggest you do is take these three books home and do some reading. These three in particular shed more light on Spare than the others. I've marked the passages which should be of interest to you. We can talk more about it some other time. Right now I have a class to attend to, so run along.'

'Yes, sir.'

He handed Jason the books, big and heavy. He just about managed to squeeze them into his little satchel.

Jason exited the room not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Was the old man really serious about what he was saying? It sounded like it. And what was he going to tell his parents when he got home? 'Mummy, Daddy, I'm really a famous magician!' He didn't think they would believe him, for he didn't believe it himself. No, Old Rennie was wrong. Surely!

Jason kept very quiet about the discussion with the old man to the others in class. He was still mulling it round in his head by the time he got home. He had so many questions to ask, not very sure how to ask them, or to who. If Mr Rennie was right, and he wasn't being led astray as his mum suggested, then the best thing he could do was to follow his advice and do as the old man said.

After dinner he wasted no time retiring to his bedroom, telling his parents he had lots of homework to do as Mr Rennie had given him a big project. It wasn't really a fib as he was half-telling the truth, he just didn't mention anything about being a reincarnation of a magician. That would have sounded a bit too unbelievable so he didn't mention it.

He got out the three art books and lined them up on his floor, and lay down next to them, making himself comfortable with his pillows. The books were big with hundreds of pages, but thankfully, as Mr Rennie had said, there were only a few pages marked off so they shouldn't take too long to go through.

The first book he glanced at was called 'The History of Art in Western Civilisation,' with lots of big words and small print. But Jason wasn't reading the words; he was more interested in the pictures, most of them in colour. He loved just looking at them, all these oil paintings, and flicked through the pages until he came to the section Old Rennie had bookmarked. It was just a short chapter on this man he mentioned, the one with the strange name: Austin Osman Spare. It was indeed a strange name, and a very strange man in himself, by the looks of it. But even stranger things were about to happen, for there on the next page was a late photograph of Spare who looked similar to the man Jason saw in his dream. But was it the same person? So this is Spare, he thought to himself. The photograph was in black and white and looked like it was

taken in a hovel, with all these cats around him and mucky stains on his jacket—probably dried paint. But the eyes, which never lie, were the same as in his dream: they were dark and piercing and looked straight at the camera, or in this case Jason, as if they were looking through him. It must have been the same man. He was probably in his late fifties when the photo was taken. With his wild hair all over the place, unwashed and uncombed, he had a rather dirty appearance and slightly emaciated as if suffering from malnutrition, and sported a grey moustache with lots of stubble round his chin; he looked something like a tramp. He was holding a paintbrush in his right hand, his fingernails black and dirty, and in the other a palette, so this photo must have been taken in his studio, but it still looked like a hovel. And he had a cigarette dangling from his mouth, just as Jason had seen in his dream.



‘Surely, I’m not you! I mean, you’re not me!’ Jason blurted out, disbelieving he could have any connection with a man who looked no better than someone from skid row. But when Jason turned over the pages he could not deny there was something, for there were photos showing examples of his work, line drawings of strange landscapes, contorted and twisted shapes, hybrid creatures like birds, half-human, their bodies sprouting wings, and animals of all different shapes and sizes, and all drawn with one continuous line in fine pencil, with his trademark initials in the corner: AOS.

Wow! Jason thought, staring at the drawings. ‘They look just like mine,’ he told himself, now not sure whether to believe Mr Rennie’s words or perhaps dismiss the whole thing as a coincidence.

He started reading some of the text next to the pictures. Very briefly, it mentioned that Spare developed an interest in art at an early age, and took a scholarship to study the subject at the prestigious Royal College of Art where he trained as a draughtsman. When he was a young man he held his first exhibition at the British Art Section of the St. Louis Exposition, and won a silver medal in 1903 at the National Competition of Schools of Art. In 1904 he held his first public exhibition in a Public Library in Walworth Road. Thanks to his father, one of his designs for a bookplate was put on display in the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy, making him the youngest person, at seventeen, to be entered that year. This gained him a lot of attention from the press and he received a 'highly critical appraisal' from some of the judges who classed his work as 'outstanding.' Several journalists paid visits to the family home to interview the young artistic genius who his peers referred to as a 'prodigy.' The following year, in 1905, Spare dropped out of the RCA to pursue his own career, earning a living as an artist doing commissioned work for various publishers, designing bookplates for friends, and painting portraits. It also said Spare published some of his artwork in books and various journals and magazines. He lived like a 'true bohemian artist,' and was also something of a recluse, very rarely venturing out, and never even travelled abroad. He loved cats, as was made obvious by the photo, and had more than forty at one point, letting them roam all over his home. He died in 1956 leaving many of his manuscripts and drawings unpublished which were dispersed through various channels and ended up in private collections. Yet his biggest impact on art in the twentieth century was his technique of automatic drawing which, as Old Rennie had said, he did in a kind of trance. This influenced many artists who came after him, none of whom were anywhere as successful. It seemed Spare had a natural talent for art and was still painting, drawing and writing even up till the day he died. Over the years his influence and 'individualistic' style of art had gone out of vogue, and now twenty years after his death (when the book was written) he had all but been forgotten. Yet there was no forgetting Spare was indeed a one-off, a man who could so completely isolate himself from others, be so self-absorbed in his own work, that he even forgot to eat or sleep sometimes! And what was even more remarkable was he never watched television, never read any newspapers, never listened to the radio, but somehow seemed to always be aware of what was going on.

'Well he certainly sounds like an interesting person,' Jason said to himself. 'Let's see what the other books say about him.'

He closed the book and dragged over the middle one to where he was lying. This was slightly bigger and had the curious title of 'Art and its

Expression in a Modernist World.' What ever that meant!

The introduction was long and laborious, full of terms the poor boy was not familiar with, and much too intellectual for his eleven year old mind to cope with. It had chapters on *Neo-Expressionism*, *Modernistic Plasticity*, *Surrealism*, *Dada as War*, and *Three Iconoclasts*, the latter referring to Spare and two other artists, one being Aubrey Beardsley, and someone else he had never heard of before.

He quickly turned to that chapter and started browsing, not reading, just looking through some of the line drawings and photos which illustrated the text. There were examples of bookplates Spare designed, some pastels (which seemed to be his favourite medium), and some objects he painted on like cups and saucers, or anything else he used for his materials, not content with just using paper, board or canvas like an ordinary artist, but even painting on wood, plaster, metal, and bric-a-brac, all signed with his distinctive initials.

This was followed by a short section detailing Spare's influence on the London Surrealist scene of the 1930s. Like Old Rennie had said, Spare was adopted as some sort of Godfather by the Surrealist movement because he was seen to have affinities with what was happening in Spain, France, and the rest of Europe, through the works of Breton, Dali, Miro, and others, except he was about twenty years ahead of them. It then talked about the psychological motivations behind his work, how he drew on the unconscious, but denied he had been influenced by the writings of the psychoanalysts Freud and Jung, so beloved of the Surrealists, referring to them as 'Fraud and Junk.'

On the last page of this short description of his work it mentioned something very curious, saying that his magic was a 'highly personalised system of sorcery,' and although it was very 'effective' it could only be employed by someone who knew what they were doing, namely Spare himself, as nobody else understood it, or was capable of doing so. It was only touched on briefly as this system of his was 'outside the remit of this short but interesting monograph.'

Now intrigued, Jason turned to the last book hoping it would be a bit more revealing. Again it had, like the others, a rather pompous-sounding title, 'The Decline of Art in Western Civilisation.' The book seemed to be promoting the idea that art was responsible for the decline of culture in the West by allowing radical movements to voice their expression through the medium of art, holding certain people accountable for this change, one being Austin Spare, who admittedly only received a page or two, saying that his method of drawing was a type of 'anti-art' in that it went against known conventions, his use of automatic drawing being a prime example. The editor of the book did not hold him in high regard,

as could be judged by his dismissive attitude, although he had to admit Spare had a distinctive talent, unique in its kind and was able to ‘capture a fleeting glimpse of any spirit or entity he caught in the corner of his eye and quickly sketch it within a matter of seconds.’ The editor didn’t seem to approve of his use of the continuous line either, remarking that it was ‘childish,’ ‘puerile,’ ‘unprofessional,’ although he had to admit it did ‘possess a certain charm.’

The writer then went on to discuss Spare’s influence on up-and-coming artists and made the same remarks about Surrealism as the other book, again being highly dismissive of that art movement because it did not constitute ‘real art.’ He was also disinclined to agree with comments made by other artists, like the British artist Augustus John who noted that Spare’s draughtsmanship could only be described as ‘unsurpassed,’ or the American artist John Singer Sargent who thought Spare was a ‘genius’ as a draughtsman and one of the greatest England has ever produced, which the writer, of course, vehemently denies.

This book unfortunately only gave two examples of Spare’s work. One was a drawing of a tiger which seemed to be emanating from a cloud, its gaping maw revealing huge fangs. The other was what the writer called a ‘conventionalised’ representation of Spare’s method of his ‘sigilisation’ showing how he reduced a desire to a symbol, yet gave no details of what the method involved or how it was actually achieved. His desire, apparently, was to have the strength of a tiger so he could lift a heavy object. This he acquired within seconds and lifted the weight as if it was as light as a feather. ‘To thank the animal, he drew the tiger in the picture, as above.’

Then Jason got to thinking, whether Old Rennie was right or wrong in his assumption, this weird artist called Spare certainly had something. And the fact that he felt a deeper connection within him, now having read all about him, made the boy certain his teacher was probably right.

He was just about to read on when his mother rudely interrupted him, barging into his room, and was far from happy.

‘Jason! What do you think you’re doing?’ she chastised him. ‘It’s way past your bedtime. You should be in bed by now and asleep.’

‘Oh, Mum,’ he started begging her. ‘Can’t I stay up a bit longer?’

‘No you cannot.’

‘But all the other boys are allowed to stay up later than me. Why do I always have to go to bed so early?’

‘Because you have to go to school tomorrow. That’s why. Now don’t argue with me. Come on, get into bed,’ she demanded, practically pulling him off the floor.

Jason got into bed, not pleased, as he didn’t feel like sleeping.

‘What’s all this rubbish on the floor?’ she asked, staring at his books.

‘They’re just some books Mr Rennie leant me.’

‘A bit high-brow for you, aren’t they?’

‘He said I might find them interesting.’

‘I see. And what did I say about Mr Rennie?’

‘That he might lead me astray.’

‘Exactly. So don’t get any big ideas. I don’t want him filling your head with rubbish.’

‘Oh, Mum,’ he started to plead.

‘No, don’t “Oh Mum” me,’ she repeated, tucking him up in bed. ‘You know what your father wants you to do when you leave school, don’t you?’

‘Become an accountant.’

‘That’s right.’

‘But I hate maths, Mum. I’m no good at it.’

‘You will be if you put your mind to it. Now come on, get some sleep,’ she said, giving him a little peck on his forehead.

She put the lights out and left him in the cosy dark, shutting firmly the door behind her. As he lay there, closing his eyes, and encouraging sleep to send him off to dreamland, her words hit home. Of course! That’s all he had to do; put his mind to it and he could achieve anything.

If he was to discover how Spare worked his system of sorcery, he might just be able to use that method to help him in his grades. The endless possibilities started filling his head. And before long he was off.

Chapter Four

When Jason woke up the next morning he remembered some vague dreams, but he wasn't interested in dreams. He decided the only thing he was going to be interested in from now on was finding how Spare's magic worked and see if he could use it himself. He made a note to speak to Mr Rennie privately after art class today and get as much information from him as possible. Then he was going to have to find some of those books of his, the ones that were so rare they'd probably cost a fortune now. How could he afford them on his meagre pocket-money of £4 a week? The thought just didn't enter his head. He would cross that bridge when he came to it. Perhaps the local library may be able to help, or even better still: why not go to the British Library? Would he be allowed access to them at his age? Would he be able to understand them? These questions and more were now filling his head, too many to deal with all at once. He would need to speak to Old Rennie first, take his advice, regardless of what his mum said, and decide from there.

Mr Rennie was more than accommodating when little Jason asked to speak to him in private after the class had finished. He seemed to be in an affable mood, sitting behind his desk, putting his feet up, and relaxing like he had all the time in the world.

'Well, my lad?' he asked, patiently.

'It's about those books you leant me,' he stammered, not really sure what he was trying to say or how to word whatever it was he thought he needed to say.

'Ah, the books. Useful, were they?'

'Very,' he nodded.

'Thought they might be. Got you to thinking, didn't they?'

‘Yes, sir. You see, I was wondering where I could get hold of Spare’s books.’

‘I see. And you thought they may help you, is that it?’

‘Yes. I think you’re right. I’ve been having the strangest dreams lately. And I dreamed about this man who looked just like Spare.’

‘I see. Well, go on, my lad,’ the teacher prompted him on.

‘I think I need to read his own words to see how I feel. I mean, I may feel I am him if I can read his books myself and then may be ...’

‘You will be able to use his power. Is that it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘To achieve what, I wonder.’

‘Perhaps it could help me improve my maths, that sort of thing.’

‘I see. But are you ready for it?’

‘What do you mean, sir?’

‘I think you may be jumping the gun a bit. Trying to run before you can walk. The best thing for you, my lad, is to concentrate on your art. It is my belief, only a conjecture, mind, that you will be able to bring him up to the surface by developing your drawing skills, like you did the other day.’

‘You mean just by drawing?’

‘Yes, in a certain way. As I said, he’s deep within your unconscious. That’s where you’ll find him. By allowing him to show, so to speak, through your art, when in the right state of mind, then you’ll find him.’

‘State of mind, sir?’

‘Yes, a form of trance. Let me explain what I mean by giving you a couple of examples. You’ve heard of the composer Mozart, haven’t you?’ Jason nodded. ‘Good. Now, he claimed he could hear his music then wrote down what he heard. What he meant was he heard it in his head. There are two sides to the brain; the left and the right. The left is logical, calculating, etc. We use it for analysing data, in decision making, that kind of thing. But the other side of our brains, the right side, is creative. It belongs to the poet, the artist, the composer. What Mozart was doing was letting the right side of his brain speak to his left side. It was from that side he heard the music, analysed it, gave it notation, and wrote it down. In the same way, the writer Charles Dickens ... I take it you know who I mean?’

Jason nodded. He knew who Old Rennie meant. Not one of his favourite authors. In fact, Jason found him rather boring and staid, refusing to even consider reading him.

‘Good,’ the teacher continued. ‘Well, he said the same thing. He claimed he didn’t invent his characters, they simply came into his head and started conversing among themselves. Dickens wrote down what he

heard and put them in his books. Again, all he was doing was allowing the right side of his brain to speak to his left. But in neither case was Mozart or Dickens in a trance at the time. It was just that they were very receptive. And that's what you have to be.'

'But how?' the poor, confused boy asked him.

'Simple. Just stop thinking.' The teacher laughed again as if it was some sort of private joke.

Jason didn't laugh. He didn't find the situation amusing at all. In fact, he found it all rather frustrating. Stop thinking! That's one thing he couldn't do.

'I can see you're perplexed, my lad,' the teacher continued. 'Don't be. It will all come to you naturally if you allow it. Just give it time. You've got another class now, so run along. We can talk more about this some other time.'

Old Rennie started gathering his books together. It was Jason's signal to leave. The boy turned round and flung his satchel over his shoulder and started walking out, not even sure whether to say goodbye to the old man or not. He guessed he didn't need to, knowing deep down inside he would be seeing him again in what looked like something that was going to develop into a deep lasting relationship, and walked out.

At home Jason decided he was going to try and develop his own technique and bring his artist to the surface, even though he wasn't quite sure how. He had been relatively successful in the past, just by not trying and allowing it to happen. He would do the same thing now, get some paper out, spread it on his bedroom floor, fetch his coloured pencils and begin to draw.

His first attempt was useless. Nothing came. He was perhaps trying too hard. He needed to switch off, let his mind go, and this would free up his arm, allowing it to move over the page.

'Right, free your mind, Jason,' he told himself. It sounded so easy; easier said than done.

He closed his eyes and tried to let his mind go blank. But he couldn't. He was thinking about what the teacher said, then realised a whole ten minutes had gone by where he had wondered off at a tangent, completely forgetting what he was supposed to be doing.

He tried again, getting nice and relaxed, opening up his mind, waiting for it to pour out its contents. But nothing happened.

Perhaps there was a knack to it, he started thinking. It made him realise he was making it harder for himself just by thinking that. Then how did Spare do it, he asked himself. Surely, he had a technique, one he developed over the years?

He needed to settle down, get comfortable, switch off and go with the

flow, as they say. He shifted his position, lying flat on his stomach, his legs bent up behind him. They started moving back and forth as if swaying to some gentle, unheard music. He propped his head up with his left hand supporting his chin and could feel his breath brush over his palm lightly. The feeling this produced was soothing, almost soporific. Instinctively, his palm came up against his nostrils, forcing him to slow his breathing right down. With eyes half-closed he finally sank into a sort of trance.

His right hand, gripping a pencil firmly, started moving all by itself. Not conscious of it, and not hearing it; the sound of his pencil marking the paper didn't even enter his ears. His mind was blank, almost empty, not thinking at all, as if slowed down entirely, just like his breathing.

It was a good half hour later before he realised his hand had stopped and was no longer moving. He opened his eyes and looked down. There before him was a picture of the tiger he had seen in the book. Or at least it looked the same. But was it?

Excited, he quickly grabbed his books, all three of them for he couldn't remember which one had the picture in it, and frantically started leafing through the first book; no, not in that one. Then the second. Not in that one either. Finally the third, and found what he was looking for. He lay the book out flat, putting his picture next to Spare's drawing for comparison. Unbelievably it was exactly the same, as if he had copied it.

Just then his mother came marching into his room. Not happy at all.

'Jason,' she yelled at him. 'I told you tea would be ready in half an hour. That was nearly an hour ago. Didn't you hear me calling you?'

Evidently he hadn't.

'Now put your books away, and come down immediately. We've been waiting for you.'

'But, Mum.'

'No buts. Just do it.'

She bent down to tidy up the mess he made on the floor, and was about to close the book he was looking at when she noticed the photo of Spare's drawing of the tiger. She picked it up, and his drawing, and put them side by side.

'Oh, Jason, you little liar,' she fumed, now even more annoyed.

'What? What have I done now?' he pleaded in all innocence.

'You told me you hadn't copied your pictures.'

'But, Mum, I didn't.'

'Don't lie to me. This is exactly the same,' she growled.

'But I only got that book yesterday. And I didn't copy it.'

'Of course you did. You wait till I tell your father about this.'

She stormed out of his bedroom with both the book and his drawing.

Through the half-open door Jason could hear his mother clamber down the stairs, then speaking with his dad in a harsh tone. Now what was little Jason going to do? Tell them the truth? Tell them he's a reincarnation of some famous artist they've never heard of? Or should he admit he was lying and tell them he copied it, just to make his life easier? They were never going to believe him either way.

At the dinner table the tension was palpable. His dad had a frown on his face which told Jason he would be having words with him afterwards. His mother kept giving him a stern look. Jason tried to avoid looking at either of them, instead playing with his food. He lost his appetite and was deeply worried about what was going to happen next.

After dinner, he asked to be excused from the table. But his father suggested he join him in the lounge whilst Mum tidied up. It was going to be one of those father-to-son talks, he figured, and sat himself down on the edge of the comfy sofa, and nervously knitted his fingers together tightly on his lap, and anxiously waited for Dad to sit down next to him.

'Well, son,' he started, 'what's all this about? Your mother tells me you've been telling us fibs.'

'But I haven't, Dad. Honest.'

'Then how do you explain this?' he asked him, pulling out the book and his drawing. 'When we asked you if you copied those drawings you distinctly said no.'

'But I didn't copy them, Dad. And Mr Rennie only leant me that book yesterday.'

'Then when did you do this picture?'

'Just before tea. But I didn't copy it. It sort of came to me, and ...' his words trailed off.

'I see. It sort of came to you?'

'Yes, you see, Mr Rennie says I've got a hidden talent and that I ought to develop it.'

'A talent? What kind of talent, son? You mean for drawing?'

'Yes, Dad. Mr Rennie thinks ...' Jason continued but was stopped by his mother coming into the lounge giving him that stern look again.

'And what has Mr Rennie been saying?' she asked him.

'Nothing, Mum,' he replied, clamming up.

'What did I say about Mr Rennie only yesterday?'

'But, Mum. He believes in me and thinks I've got a natural gift.'

'And I've told you not to take too much notice of that man.'

'But why, Mum?'

'Because he's a funny man. He's never been married. Never had kids. He's always by himself and doesn't have any friends. He's been at that school ever since the day it was built, nearly 28 years ago, and never

been seen with a woman in public. God knows what he does when he's not there. He's never been seen outside of school. He's never been seen in a pub, a cinema, or a theatre. And he's never once visited a shop to do shopping, like normal people. He lives all by himself in that grotty flat of his and never allows any visitors round there either. There's something not right with that man, and the less time you spend with him the better.'

'But, Mum.'

'I said, no buts,' stamping her foot down.

'Your mother is right, son,' his father chipped in. 'You see there are some funny men around and he may be one of them. You're a bit too young to understand, but certain men don't like women and tend to prefer their own kind. And they do funny things together.'

'Like what, Dad?'

'Never you mind, son. Just funny things. They're not to be trusted. Now, why don't you forget all about this nonsense he's been filling your head with, work hard, get some good grades, and then you can become an accountant, just like me.'

'But, Dad ...'

'NO BUTS,' they both snapped at him.

Chapter Five

‘Ah, there you are, my lad, you’ve been avoiding me the past few days.’

Old Rennie stopped to face his star pupil as they clashed in the corridor.

Jason looked down, not really sure what to say. It’s true, he had been avoiding the teacher. His parents were very strict about the relationship the young boy was having with his old master. It couldn’t be disputed. And again they had urged him to refrain from seeing him so often. But he seemed so harmless, there was little the old man could do to him, or so he thought.

‘Well, laddie?’ the teacher urged him on, impatiently waiting for a reply. ‘You’ve stopped attending my classes. You been ill, have you?’

‘No, sir,’ he stammered. ‘It’s just that my parents ...’

‘Oh, and what have they to do with this?’

‘They’ve been saying ...’

‘I see. I would very much like to know what they have been saying, but fear their words will be highly inappropriate. Do you trust me, laddie?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Then come to my study after school. I want to put your mind straight on a few things.’

Jason was just about to utter another ‘But’ and stopped himself. It would be no good explaining to Old Rennie now what he had been advised by his parents. He would wait until they were alone together, later, and continued on his way down the corridor to his next lesson. He had a funny feeling Old Rennie’s eyes were burning into the back of his skull but daredn’t turn round to look in case he was right.

Jason kept his promise and knocked gently on his old teacher's door, half-hoping he wasn't in so he could slip away and go home. Yet that was not to be. He heard the usual word, 'Come,' and entered the study hesitantly.

He found the old teacher slouched in his leather armchair, his big boots resting on the edge of his long desk, his hands cradling his head, his eyes staring up into empty space. Jason waited in the centre of the room, quiet but nervous. This was not a conversation he was looking forward to. The atmosphere felt strained and awkward already. How much more so when the old man started to speak, he wondered.

'Ah, there you are, my lad,' he finally said, as if suddenly becoming aware of his presence. 'Well sit down. Now what's this all about? Do your parents distrust me or something?'

The boy looked at the man sheepishly, not sure how to answer the question.

'Well spit it out!' he demanded, shifting in his chair.

'It's just that my parents think I need to be careful.'

'Of course you do. Not just with me, but with everyone else. For there are some strange people around. Each one has their own agenda, some not so honest as mine. Now, your parents have probably told you I am trying to lead you astray. It could be no further from the truth. I told you what I think, whether you believe me or not. But you have to find the answer yourself within. Trust your own instincts. I'm not saying don't trust your parents, just have a bit more faith in yourself and your own convictions. Now, you know what's happening next week, don't you?'

'It's the end of term, sir.'

'Exactly. That means you've got the whole summer, six full weeks to sort yourself out. What you need to do is to spend that time getting into yourself. As I said, your power lies within you. Keep practicing your drawing techniques but don't try to copy Spare. Just let it come naturally. Develop your own talent by absenting yourself.'

'How do I do that?'

'Simple. Just pretend you're not there,' he told the boy, then burst into laughter; it was a joke only perhaps he understood.

The boy wandered home, mulling the idea around, trying to get it straight in his head. Perhaps the teacher was right, the summer would be a perfect time to sort this out once and for all, then he could decide who was right, who was wrong. See if he really was this magician. See if he did have these magical powers. And see if there was such a thing as reincarnation. He would have to read up on it. That's something he would definitely be doing this summer.

He made no excuse to his parents for being slightly later than usual

and decided he was not going to divulge the short conversation he had with a man they were deeply suspicious of. He would keep it quiet and convey to them that he was taking their advice on board fully and not seeing the old man, apart from in lessons. Besides, after next week he would not be seeing him at all, not for a whole six weeks. In his young mind that seemed like a very long time.

When the school finally broke up and the start of the summer holiday arrived, Jason was more than eager to get started on his fresh assignment. What he was going to do was plenty of research first. With his hard earned pocket-money (from doing odd chores like helping out in the garden, cleaning Dad's car, that kind of thing), Jason would get the bus each morning to the city centre, hop off the Number 42, and head straight to the library. As luck would have it they stocked quite a large selection of books in their New Age section, but nothing by this man called Spare, only loads of books on reincarnation, magic, the occult, and all sorts of obscure religious works. Also, their art section was quite extensive. He managed to find a few more books mentioning Spare as an artist and photocopied the relevant sections. (Before the end of the term, Old Rennie asked for his books to be returned. Jason rather begrudgingly handed them back. He did go through them a few more times and knew them off by heart practically, although admitting to himself he did not understand all the words used. That was something else he was going to have to brush up on, improve his vocabulary and make sure he had his old Chambers dictionary handy at all times.)

Within a couple of weeks, Jason accumulated enough material to be going on with, and enough to concentrate on for the next four weeks. Library visits were no longer necessary. He ransacked every book he came across which he thought might be useful in his quest, photocopying page after page until he had a good-sized folder. All he had to do now was to try and understand what these writers were saying.

Unfortunately, no book by Spare was available through the inter-loan system either. The staff at his library had never even heard of him, giving him a blank look as if he was referring to some non-existent person, someone who obviously did not have much of an impact on their line of work—even though they dealt in books—and never left much of a legacy in the world of art either, according to them. So all he had was a few passages here and a few passages there, extracted from various books on the occult and esoteric sciences. But at least it was something.

Jason got into the habit of spending each afternoon reading and learning. Understanding Spare's artistic technique was fairly simple. He would go into a trance and waited for the 'moment' to seize him. When it came upon him, he would quickly dash out a sketch and in a matter of

minutes there would be a drawing of an Indian squaw, an owl, his cats, or a beautiful woman, all drawn with one continuous line, sometimes the pencil very lightly touching the paper to give a soft edge, at other times a very thick line by being pressed down hard on the surface. This is something Jason would have to develop; to learn how to control the pencil in such a way that he was really the master and not a slave to some freewheeling pencil with a mind of its own.

Jason started going through the drawings by Spare, now amounting to around twenty sketches where he used this method. Some of them Jason enlarged on the photocopier for better detail. Also, it helped to look at them through a magnifying glass for greater clarity. Sometimes the lines were so faint you could hardly see them. The glass now made these visible. It was added proof that the pencil never left the page, but seemed to swirl around until it found a point of entry and came down hard on the paper, creating a visible object, even showing signs of shading as the pencil went back and forth, filling in dark shades to give depth to the pictures so they weren't flat or two-dimensional.

'If only I could draw like this,' Jason wanted to exclaim. But then he remembered what Mr Rennie had advised him, to develop his own technique and not copy Spare. Yet if he really was Spare then that would not be copying, would it? In a way, he would be continuing his work.

Then in the evening, after tea, and when he felt sleepy yet not tired, but relaxed as one does after a good hearty meal, like a well fed cat that wants to curl up, Jason would spend a good two to three hours just mindlessly doodling, allowing his hand to draw whatever it wished, but still consciously under his control. He developed it to the point where he was in an in-between state, neither asleep nor awake. And it was during these precious moments he produced his best work, not brilliant like the genius that Spare obviously was, but better than his previous efforts.

He learnt through books on yoga and meditation that the best state of mind is when you are hardly breathing, when it was almost slowed down to the point of not being present at all, producing a deep, calm, relaxing feeling, a kind of euphoria which was conducive for just the sort of art he was trying to create. Simply slowing down his breathing, but not quite stopping it, allowed him to go into a trance. Then, and only then, did he put pencil to paper.

The resultant work he would show to Old Rennie when the school term resumed next week. Jason estimated he now had a good collection of at least a dozen sketches, each one representative of his best work. It would be enough to impress the old man and then perhaps he would be convinced his speculations were right. Perhaps he was after all this old artist reincarnated nearly twenty years (or, to be more precise, 18 years,

11 months, 15 days) after Spare's death. The lasting impression on the boy was that it came so naturally to him, even he was now beginning to believe it. All he had to do next, having mastered his artistic side, was to understand how this magic of Spare's worked and put it into practice. He had a horrible feeling this was going to be easier said than done.

None of the books he found in the library went into any great detail. They were too vague as if the writers who had decided to write about Spare's system of sorcery didn't understand it themselves or were trying to convey it in less than recondite terms so it could be communicated to an outsider, someone who was not in the know. Like Jason, who never had any leanings in that direction, no inclination at all, apart from enjoying the odd horror film which incorporated some magical elements, the ones they usually put on early in the evening which aren't really gory. He wasn't allowed to watch real horror films as they were usually on late at night, and way beyond his bedtime.

One writer explained that Spare's system was neither black nor white. It did not partake of magic *per se*, of the variety most people know about, as it had nothing to do with dressing up in robes and performing strange rituals. It was more to do with using the powers of the subconscious. The writer explained that really the occult—and what is meant by that term—is nothing more than all the things we do not know about, for they are truly hidden, i.e. occult, and therefore not conscious at all. By his definition, he was implying that the occult was simply the unconscious, for the unconscious knows everything. When it becomes conscious, and known, then it is no longer occult. For example, a car parked round the corner is occult, i.e. hidden, for we are not aware of it. But as we go round the corner, we see it and become aware of it, and it is therefore no longer occult.

Fair enough, Jason thought to himself, I understand that. No problem. The writer then made another analogy. Supposing you had bought an old house. You knew all of its rooms, where the bathroom was, the kitchen, the dining room, etc. And after a few months of living there you knew it inside out. You knew its little idiosyncrasies, like the toilet didn't flush properly if you didn't push the lever down fully; the handle on the door of one of the bedrooms was a bit wonky; a floorboard on the landing was slightly loose and made a squeaking noise every time you walked over it, etc. But then suddenly you had a certain experience which made you become aware that there was another room in the house you had no idea existed. It was attached to the back wall. There was even a door now visible on the inside of the wall at the back. You try it but it is locked, so there's no way you can get into the room to find out what's inside. You walk around outside trying to find a window. There aren't any. So how

do I get in there, you ask yourself. There must be a way. If only you had a key. Then after months and months of searching you finally find a key. You try it in the lock and it fits. Brilliant, you think, all I have to do now is unlock it, open the door and find out what is lurking in there. So you open the door. It makes a horrible creaking sound as you push the door open wide. It obviously hasn't been used for a long time. There's a horrible smell also, a dank, damp smell, which suggests the room hasn't been aired for a long time either. And as you open the door wider you become aware of how vast it is inside, a massive room, but mostly in the dark. You look for a light switch near the door. There doesn't appear to be one. You have to fetch a torch just so you can see your way round. As you move into the room you bang your knee against something, possibly an old trunk. Later you have to bend down as you move further into the room to avoid hitting your head on the lower beams. This room seems impossibly big, too big for a medium-sized house, and it takes several excursions and setting up temporary lighting before you can find your way round fully. As you suspected, there are no windows, and the only light you have is the one you have set up and the one coming through the open door adjoining the main room. After several more visits to this room, you feel you know it off by heart. You know its layout, its size, what it contains, where everything is, and the easiest way to the far end. In fact, you know this room so well now it is no longer occult.

The interior of the house, before the discovery of the secret room, represents the conscious mind, whereas the secret room, which is impossibly vast and expansive, represents the unconscious. The door with its key into that room represents a technique which Spare developed for entering into that part of his mind. And this kind of went back to what Old Rennie said about the two halves of the brain. Once this technique had been developed it was so easy to move into that space it was no different than walking out of one room and into another. And this is what Spare was an expert at. He could draw on the powers of the subconscious because they were so easily available to him, and bring those powers out of that room to make them work consciously in what he called 'atavistic resurgence,' what ever that meant. Spare, it appears, must've swallowed a dictionary, writing in a peculiar style that used all these fancy words Jason had never heard of before.

The same writer made another analogy. When a fortune-teller is using a crystal ball or a deck of tarot cards, what she is doing is really letting her unconscious speak back to her, allowing it to manifest through the depths of the ball or the symbolism of the cards. It's a way of by-passing the conscious mind so that the unconscious can speak, because, as he mentioned before, the unconscious knows everything.

If that were true then, it would be possible to find out what Spare's system involved by diving deep down into the unconscious. It would also be possible to understand mathematics, French, history, and all those other subjects Jason felt he was poor at. If only he could communicate with his unconscious. But how? And what was the key Spare used? Was it going into a trance, drawing automatically like he did, or was there some other technique he adopted?

All the possibilities were tantalising. Jason couldn't wait to find out. Hopefully in the few remaining extracts he hadn't read yet the answer would be there, somewhere.

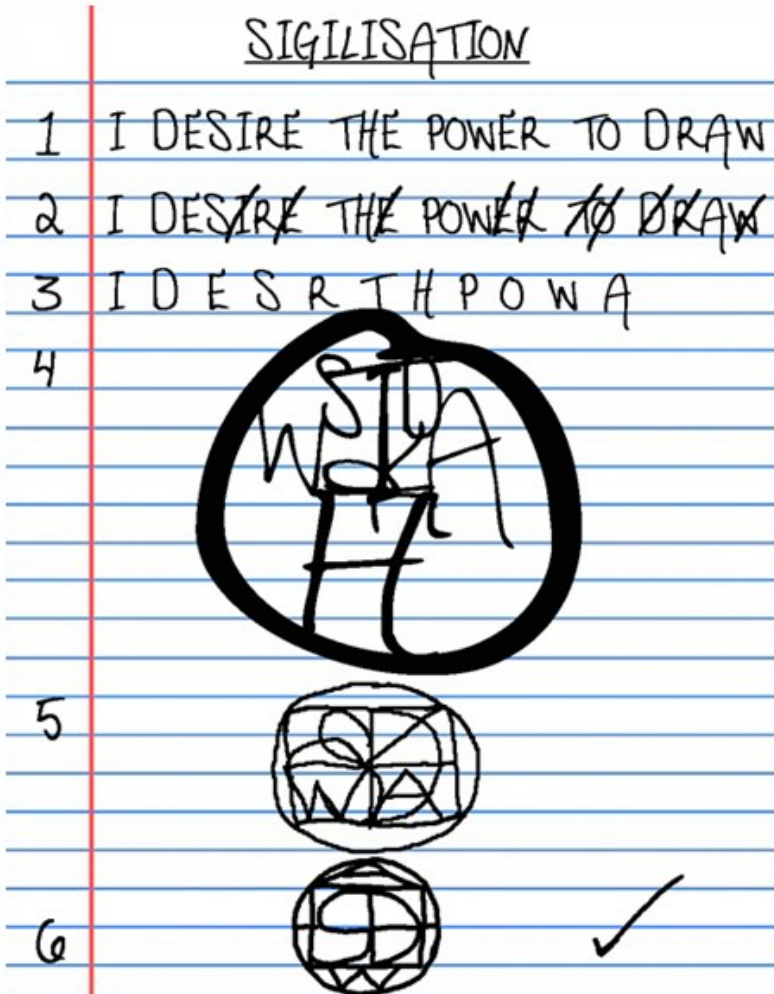
He kept reading, trying to get his head round what some of the writers were saying. One of them mentioned Spare's use of 'sigilisation,' a term little Jason came across before in one of the art books Old Rennie lent him, and remembered what he said about Spare's use of sigils. But how did they really work? He was about to find out.

On a piece of paper write down your desire. It could be something simple like 'I DESIRE THE POWER TO DRAW.' Now cross out all the letters that are repeated and turn the remaining letters into a symbol, what is called a sigil. It should be done in such a way you were not reminded of the original desire. And keep drawing it until the sigil became more refined and simple. Now concentrate on the finished sigil until you have memorised it. Close your eyes and see it in your mind's eye. (The writer did say this was a hard thing to do and suggested practice makes perfect. He used the analogy of the story in Rudyard Kipling's book *Kim* where he has to memorise all these objects laid out before him. A cloth is then placed over them and Kim has to recall what each object was and where it was.) Once the sigil was firmly locked in the mind, see it imbued with energy, then drop it, imagining that it is sinking into a deep abyss below and no longer visible. Then forget it. (Again, the writer explained this was the hardest part; forgetting the original desire helped it to sink into the subconscious where the sigil could do its work. If you suddenly remembered the desire then the operation would be forfeited, and the result lost. He suggested using the method of repression.)

Jason considered this use of sigilisation was the key to opening the metaphorical door. Going into the room was analogous to working with the unconscious where you charge the sigil and drop it. Repressing it was the act of closing the door, walking away and pretending the room never even existed.

He thought he would give it a go. As the writer suggested, construct a simple sentence embodying your desire, transform it into a symbol which looked nothing like the desire and then charge it in your mind just by

concentrating on it. Okay, that sounded simple enough. He wrote out the same desire as in the suggestion, eliminating all the repeated letters and used the 'I' to form the central pillar of his sigil, with the letters 'S' and 'D' to either side of it. The 'R' and 'E' he placed upside down and back to back; the 'H' formed a block letter, the 'T' topped his 'I', the 'W' and 'A' he placed underneath, with the 'O' in the word 'power' forming a big circle round the whole sigil, so that all the letters were now in place.



As recommended, he simplified the design, making it more compact and easier to remember. Jason wasn't expecting to work miracles the first time; after all, he wasn't even sure he was doing it correctly, but had a funny feeling he had done this before, as if it was all coming back to

him. He tested his memory by first staring at the sigil, then covering it over and practiced drawing it again on a separate piece of paper, entirely from memory. When he finished, he uncovered the original one and found it to be slightly different, not quite matching or on par with the copied version, the difference being so minute he thought he might be able to get away with it. Did it really make any difference how successful the magic was, he wondered, and thought about it twice. No, he would try doing it again until it was exactly the same.

Three attempts later he was satisfied he had mastered the technique. It was identical. All he had to do now was transfer it to his mind and concentrate on it. For this he used a bit of yoga, or meditation, just to slow down his breathing, which in turn slowed down his mental activity, allowing him to relax and concentrate. He brought up the sigil, seeing it as pervaded with white light, and just when he thought he had got it, the damned thing started moving, waving all over the place, dancing like a naked flame being blown by a strong breeze. He clutched his hands together, bit his lip, and desperately tried to hold the stupid sigil still, but it wouldn't behave. It kept moving up and down, from side to side, getting bigger, getting smaller, until exasperated, Jason finally gave up and opened his eyes.

'This is impossible,' he blurted to himself. 'This will never work.'

He went back to the texts he photocopied instead, thinking it would take his mind off the sigil and perhaps also help him to find a way of controlling it.

'The magician is an embodiment of will,' one of the pages exclaimed. 'He is pure will,' said another. Elsewhere, 'The average person is a mass of conflicting wills all pulling this way and that, each will seeking to be satisfied, from basic things like hunger or thirst, or fatigue caused by poor health and bad habits like smoking, and also the most powerful will of all; the sexual drive.' Well, he didn't know about the last part yet, although he had an inkling what it involved having overheard the older lads at school talking about it. But as he did not suffer from that problem yet, he put it out of his mind and focused on the rest. Well, he wasn't hungry, or tired. He certainly wasn't suffering from ill-health or fatigue, but obviously these could all contribute to a state of agitation, and thus disturb the equilibrium of mind needed to charge a sigil. Then what do we do? Satisfy all our desires until they are exhausted? Or do we repress them in the hope they will eventually go away and no longer be a burden or have control over our lives? Jason then remembered how Spare could go days without eating or sleeping. Perhaps he had learned to develop a will so strong that all these little wills were subsumed under this big will.

Apparently, Spare had developed this magical will at an early age. He

claimed he was taught all about magic when he was a young boy by some witch-woman. She taught him how to think on a magical level, to develop his will and helped him with his powers of visualisation. Also how to move into his dreams and take them over and thereby control them. She taught him all about casting spells, using a similar technique to that of his sigilisation, and how to move out of his body consciously. She also told him he had a natural gift, not only as a born artist, but also a born magician. He repaid her by doing drawing after drawing of this woman, not only in pencil, but other mediums like charcoal and pastels, something young Jason was going to ask for his next birthday—a big set of pastels in a finely polished wooden box for his twelfth.

Apparently this witch also claimed to be the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter in a long line of descent that stretched right back hundreds of years, even tracing her ancestry to the witches of Salem, Massachusetts, and was the last of a magical tradition, and that by bestowing all her knowledge on a young Spare she was continuing that tradition, having him initiated at the age of seven by pricking his thumb and mixing her blood with his. Jason didn't like that part of the story. He hated anything to do with blood. Couldn't even stand the sight of needles and practically fainted when his dentist went to anaesthetise his gums with a jab before drilling a bad tooth. He would skip that part, he decided, but thought it would be a good idea in the future to initiate himself, so as to be aligned with Spare and his magical current. How he was going to do it he didn't know; it would come to him one day. First, he needed to get the practicalities out of the way, like learning how to concentrate, learning how to visualise properly, and lastly, learning how to forget!

Another writer mentioned the story of a king who was granted three wishes. All these wishes would come true if he thought of everything else except the colour green. As long as he didn't think of that colour his wishes would come true. 'No problem,' the king told himself. 'I will forget all about the colour green.' As soon as he resolved to forget the colour green, the next thing he knew he was assailed by the colour green everywhere he looked; the green grass on his lawn, the green leaves on the trees, the green dress his wife the queen was wearing, the green curtains in their bedroom, the green bedspread on their bed, the green towels in the bathroom, the green cabbage on his plate, the green celery growing in the garden, the green apples in the orchard, everywhere he looked he saw nothing but green. And having failed miserably to forget all about the colour green, his wishes were never granted.

Jason figured he was going to suffer a similar fate. But nothing he would have to forget about would be quite so ubiquitous as green. The

story was obviously exaggerated for effect. The whole point of it was to stress how difficult it is to forget about something consciously, especially when it forms part of your desire. It's something you want, but at the same time you have to forget you want it. How difficult could that be!

Nor did it help when he read the next paragraph, with the writer concluding that the work of a real magician is hard, and few made it to the end. It required constant vigilance, thought control, a strong will, perfect visualisation, equanimity of mind so that no emotion interfered, or was allowed to interrupt the thought processes, and lastly, and above all, sheer determination.

This made Jason sit back and think. What was he getting into here? And did he really want to be a 'real magician' as opposed to those fake ones on TV? What were his goals? The immediate ones were quite obvious, to learn Spare's technique, and from there learn how to use it to better his skills at school. Okay, he wasn't excelling at art, but he wasn't that bad either; his English, reasonable; his science was okay, it's just that his history, maths and French let him down badly. If he could enhance these last three subjects then he would stand a better chance at university. And then what after that? Did he really want to become an accountant like his dad? It sounded far too boring for his young developing mind. Being stuck behind a desk all day with a calculator, going through other peoples figures. No, that just wasn't for him. His aspirations went higher than that; he just needed to know where they were taking him, and perhaps then follow his own path, just as Spare had done by concentrating on his art and eking out a living by doing loads of commissioned work.

Again, just as he was about to go back to his photocopied pages, his mother interrupted by coming into his room.

'Now, Jason,' she started, folding her arms across her chest to emphasise her authority. 'What did we say about staying up late during the summer holidays?'

'That I could stay up till 10.00.'

'And what time is it now?'

He cautiously looked over his shoulder at his bedside clock. '10.30.'

'Exactly. You should have been in bed half an hour ago. Now, come on, get to bed.'

Again she started tidying up the mess he made on his floor, picking up all the pages and having a quick browse. Then she looked to the boy quizzically.

'What's all this?' she asked him reservedly, as if she was afraid to hear the answer.

'It's just a project I'm working on. I was thinking of doing something

for a hobby, you know, when we go back to school next week.'

'Well, that's good. It will keep you busy and stop you from getting bored. In fact, thinking about it, you have been very busy these past few weeks. I can't believe you're already going back to school so soon. Now, why don't you tell me what you've been doing, and why have you been so secretive about it?'

She stroked his blond mop of hair back and gave him a quick cuddle as he lay in bed.

'Well, I was thinking ...' he stopped himself mid-sentence, not even sure what he was going to say.

'Oh? You were thinking what?' she prompted him.

'Do I really have to be an accountant?'

'We've gone through all this before. Your dad wants you to do well for yourself. I do too. Now, if you don't work hard at school and get good grades you will end up on the streets, with no job, nowhere to sleep and no friends. Now, do you remember the other day went we went shopping and we drove past that funny old man sitting on the bench?' Jason nodded. 'And your father said to you "Do you want to be like him?"'

'Yes, I remember.'

'Well that man was a tramp. And you don't want to be a tramp like him, do you?'

'No, Mum.'

'Good. Now lie down, get some sleep and we'll talk about this some other time.'

She gave him a quick kiss and tucked him up in bed. When his mother left the room Jason could not help smiling, for the old man she was referring to looked just like Spare who looked like a tramp.

Chapter Six

The next few days were spent in a concerted effort to develop his magical will. Jason wrote down a list of exercises he was going to do each day, at least twice, if not three times. He only had five days left, then it would be back to school, and he wanted to impress the others in his class, show them he really did have some kind of talent. Of course, he wasn't so stupid to think he would become a master overnight, but he needed to get the basics sorted out first.

One exercise involved staring at a candle, then closing the eyes and concentrating on the after image. Usually the flame turned into the opposite colour against the blank background. All you have to do then is to hold the image steady and make sure it didn't waver. When you became proficient at that, you were ready to move on to the next stage; controlling the flame by making it grow big or making it go small, so tiny, it almost disappears, then back to its normal size. Once that stage had been reached you then made the image of the flame move like an ordinary candle flame for a few seconds, then stop for a few more, then start again, all the while ensuring it was under the will and not moving of its own accord.

Jason went to his next set of exercises, working with different objects, like a blank white square held mentally for at least a minute. Invariably he found that not only did the square move, it became rectangular. Also the colour would change from a pure white, to a dull grey, then orange. In fact, it would go through all the colours of the spectrum in less than a minute. And he would give up, have a temper tantrum, and get stropky, all because that nasty little square did not want to behave!

What is a poor boy to do? He had no choice but to start all over again,

and found that at certain times of the day some exercises were easier than others, usually after eating, for the mind was calm and relaxed, not thinking about food as hunger had been satisfied. He found the mental exercises would then be straightforward. The square in his mind's eye would stay a square. When he wanted it to, he would change its colour from white to blue, then to red, holding each colour for a few seconds before moving on to the next one.

He tried a white cross, pinning it to his bedroom wall at eye level, then moving towards it, his eyes fixed on where the two lines intersect. Some writer suggested it was best to concentrate more on the feeling of moving as if he was being conveyed on a conveyor belt towards it so the cross filled the whole of his vision, then retreating slowly and watching it get smaller again. Once he had this stage fixed, he sat in an upright chair, his back perfectly straight, and closed his eyes. Now he brought up the cross, visualising it as a perfect white, and imagined moving towards it so that it got bigger and bigger. Then back again so it became smaller and smaller. He kept repeating this exercise until he could actually feel he was really moving, just like on a conveyor belt, even to the point where he went straight through the cross to the other side and practically lost consciousness.

All of these exercises were designed to not only enhance his will-power, but also his powers of visualisation and receptiveness. He was constructing a magical engine, one that would be so powerful that nothing could stop him, for he understood now that it is the will, his will, which is the key to success.

Yet, having said that, there was one exercise he always failed in. It was called 'blanking the mind,' involving making the mind completely blank so that no thoughts came into his head, no images, no impressions, no sounds from outside, each of which could start a chain of thoughts, like the other day when he heard the sound of a car going by outside and wondered whose car it was, what it looked like, where it was going, and then coming to the realisation he had gone all the way down this track and not even realised he was doing it! Oh boy, was this hard work.

He would never be like Spare who could make his mind go blank as if he just flicked a switch in his head. Little Jason remembered reading how the man was once out walking with an admirer of his. It was a beautiful sunny day. His admirer bet him he couldn't make it rain as there wasn't a cloud in sight. Spare, always up for a challenge, wagered that he could and stood still in the middle of the park, quickly drew a sigil of his desire, then put the piece of paper to his forehead and closed his eyes. His admirer said he looked like a statue, so still and immobile he could have been one. A few seconds later Spare opened his eyes, told his

companion it was done, and continued walking. His admirer, somewhat sceptical, looked up at the sky: still not a cloud in sight. But by the time they got back to his home, just a short distance away, and only a matter of minutes, they were both drenched to the bone. Now he believed him. Although Spare was never one to divulge his secrets, he let it be known that it was purely a trick of the mind, and simply making it go blank.

‘Wow!’ little Jason thought to himself. ‘If only I could do that.’

But he still had a long way to go yet. Obviously the trick was to charge the sigil, drop it, make the mind go blank so that it, the desire it embodied, and everything else connected with it, were totally blotted out, completely forgotten because there was no thinking or conscious thought remaining. It was like the secret room. Not only did you close the door afterwards, and throw away the key, you forgot all about the room. That was an act of repression. And that is how the mind had to work, which was why Spare was so different from others, because he developed this technique to the full with such mastery it became second nature to him.

To test his theory, Jason decided the time was right to go back to charging a sigil. If it didn’t work it would be down to his poor technique. Again he would keep it simple, something manageable and within his limited grasp.

He wrote down the same desire as before, the ability to draw, and formed it into a simple sigil. He sat on the floor, crossed his legs and made sure he had it perfectly memorised. He closed his eyes, brought up the sigil and held it with his mind’s eye. This time the sigil behaved, not wavering at all. He imagined it being imbued with white light, then let it go, seeing it drop into the abyss below. Quickly he opened his eyes, jumped off the floor, clapped his hands, and went downstairs for tea.

‘You look pleased with yourself,’ his mother chirped, handing him his plate.

‘Perhaps he’s got a girlfriend,’ his father joked.

‘Well, there is this girl across the road,’ Jason blurted out.

‘I thought so,’ his father chimed. ‘And what’s her name?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve only seen her twice on the way to school.’

‘Well, perhaps you’ll see her again, when you go back to school,’ his mother said, as they started tucking into their meal.

Little Jason went quiet. He hadn’t really seen a girl on the way to school. It was just his way of taking his mind off things. Besides, he decided he had no time for girls at the moment. He wanted to concentrate on school, get on with his lessons, excel in everything. It was if suddenly he had become aware of his full potential. He wanted to declaim to the world that he could do anything, if he put his mind to it. The thought created a visible smile on his face. This was picked up both his parents

who beamed at each other. They carried on eating in silence.

Immediately upon returning to his bedroom, he was seized with a state he could only describe as ‘giddiness.’ Seeing all his drawings lying scattered on the floor, his sigil lying next to them, reminded him of what he was trying to forget. And as soon as he remembered his original desire, it all came flooding back to him. The secret door was now open, producing a very peculiar sensation bordering on hyper-anxiety.

Streams of images started flowing through his mind. Hordes of symbols, swarms of signs, torrents of thoughts were invading it as if his unconscious had been let loose, like someone had opened some floodgates allowing all this stuff to flood in. It made him feel giddy like someone suffering from vertigo, or the dizziness of acrophobia, as if he was no longer standing still with his back to the door, but moving, not physically but mentally, and being overwhelmed psychologically, with everything else moving around him as well. He wanted to reach out, hold on to something fast, to stop himself from falling over. He would be keeling over any minute like a ship in a stormy sea with powerful waves lashing at the sides threatening to overturn the vessel completely.

‘What have I done?’ he wanted to ask himself, but had no time for that. He knew exactly what to do.

He grabbed his pencils, laid out sheets of paper on the floor and started drawing, letting all this stuff pour out of his head like it was a funnel. He imagined horses galloping across the sky, elephants thudding across the land, snakes hissing their way through forests, monkeys swinging from tree to tree, fishes, dolphins, porpoises leaping out of the waters, spiders crawling across sprawling landscapes. Even dinosaurs made an appearance, as if he had tapped into something deep, something primal, a well of imagery that went back to the dawn of creation. It all flooded out until it was spent. The creativity had run dry, and finally after a couple of hours, he was able to stop, his mind free. Where there had been a torrent, a rushing flood, now there was barely a trickle.

Exhausted, he put down his pencil and stared at all these strange pictures before him, mostly in disbelief as he could not believe he had done all this, as if someone or something was drawing through him. But there it was. The eye cannot lie. He could see his little sigil had worked, done the trick, for this was some of the best work he had ever done. Yet it was ruined by lack of restraint. It was too much. Some of the pictures were messy due to his inability to control all the imagery. And it was this uncontrollability he was going to have to get under his will. It was all very well this stuff pouring out, but it needed to be controlled. And that’s what separated the genius from the artist.

Satisfied, he went to bed. He now knew how Spare’s system worked.

Chapter Seven

‘Hey, Spaceman!’ he heard someone shout behind him. Jason turned round to see it was Charlie again chasing after him, almost out of breath as usual. He looked at his chubby friend. Every day he appeared to be putting on more weight, and being shorter than himself made it more pronounced, looking as if he had stopped growing up and started growing sideways. He was late for school. So was Jason.

‘Where you been?’ he asked him, finally catching up. ‘I haven’t seen you all summer.’

‘I’ve been busy,’ he proudly exclaimed.

‘It looks like it,’ Charlie remarked, noticing the rolls of paper under Jason’s arm.

‘Oh these! They’re just some drawings I did over the holiday. I’m going to show them to Old Rennie. He should find them interesting.’

‘Oh? Drawings of what?’

‘You’ll see,’ he replied, with a little smirk on his face.

Jason thought he would bring the best of his work to school, only about fifteen pieces, but enough he considered to be truly representative of his emerging talent. He was hoping Mr Rennie would be impressed, and although his mother wasn’t too keen on the idea, he considered his own future to be more important than how she felt. He was not only going to show Old Rennie how good he was as an artist, he was going to show the whole class, the whole school, the whole country, even the whole world. He couldn’t wait.

The first thing he did in his art class was to take his drawings to Mr Rennie’s desk and leave them there before the teacher entered the classroom. He wanted to surprise him, knowing full well Mr Rennie

would recognise his work and look in his direction. And that's exactly what happened. All the class sat quietly, glancing over their shoulders occasionally at little Jason as he sat there smugly in his seat at the back of the class. It was so quiet you could hear the sheets being leafed through as Mr Rennie, bending over his desk, went through each one, nodding at times, a quick peek at Jason, then back to the next one. Finally he stood up and smiled, his eyes firmly fixed on the little boy. Only one word issued from his lips: 'Excellent.'

All heads turned to look at Jason. The boy could only smile.

'I can see some of you have been busy during the holiday,' he started, pacing up and down at the front of the class. 'Good. Let's hope you've all been practicing because I've just had the marks through from the end of last term, and they were far from satisfactory. I would deem them disgraceful, if not downright diabolical.' When that last word came out, many of the boys looked down, ashamed, almost as if he was referring directly to them. 'So some of you had better buck up your ideas. There's only one person in the whole of this class who shows any modicum of talent, young Jones at the back there.'

Again they all turned to look at Jason who sat there silent but happy, staring into space, with a suggestive look on his face, feigning surprise as if to say, 'Who? Me, sir?'

'What do I have to do to get you boys to improve?' he continued, not really asking them, perhaps more to himself. 'Art is a natural expression of the emotions. It is what separates us from the animals. It is a refined state of mind, an enhancement of the senses, a visual representation of our universe. Like mathematics, it is a common language, the *lingua franca* of any country. It can be not only understood but also appreciated by all. It is not something you have to learn, but a gift you have had bestowed upon you as a human being. All you have to do is to bring it out of you,' he gesticulated wildly, his arms making a large arching movement from his head to his knees.

All the class remained silent. It was quite obvious Mr Rennie was not happy with them, except his star pupil. He continued to pace up and down, sizing up the class with long strides, occasionally shifting his eyes to the grimy windows as if looking for inspiration.

'So I thought today what we will do is some portrait painting, a real figure, one of you perhaps. So who would like to sit for a portrait?'

Immediately they all put their hands up—except Jason—as sitting rather than painting was definitely more preferable for most of them.

'Good. Let me see, who shall we have'

Above the clamour of 'Me,' 'Me, sir,' 'Please, sir,' his roving eye did a full circle round the whole of the class, his finger poised mid-air, ready

to strike like a hawk coming down on its prey.

‘You, Clarke,’ he said, pointing to the boy two seats in front of Jason. ‘You look the best dressed today, Clarke. Come here, my lad.’

All the other boys moaned, except Jason.

‘Stop grumbling, boys. This is an art class, not a drama class. Stop overacting. Now, quickly, move all the tables and chairs into a circle. I want young Clarke here,’ he said, tapping the boy on the shoulder, ‘to sit in the middle. Fetch a chair, Clarke,’ he gestured to the boy, who promptly did as he was told, placing a chair in the centre of the class, and sat down. Mr Rennie came up behind him and swivelled the chair round to face the window so the front of the sitter was exposed to more light, or what little light there was.

‘Now, now. Quieten down. We have a full two hour session today. And I intend to make artists of you all.’

Within a few minutes the boys had arranged their desks in a big circle around Clarke who sat quietly in the middle, obviously pleased he didn’t have to do any painting as he hated it anyway. Still dressed in his blazer, he took up a pose resembling some Greek god, his hand on one knee, the other, a clenched fist, resting on his hip, and became as still as a statue.

‘Right, lads, before you begin, before you even put pencil to paper, just look. Use you eyes, that is what they are for. Look, keeping looking. Take in this information your visual sense is conveying to your brain. Notice what Clarke is wearing. Look at his shoes, his blazer, his shirt and tie. Notice the trousers, how the bottom of the trousers hang just above his shoes. His hair, its colour, its texture. Is it straight? Is it curly? Is it freshly washed? Has he even combed it today, we wonder ...’

The class started laughing.

‘Shush!’ he beckoned. ‘Be quiet. Concentrate on the god before you.’

They all started laughing again.

‘Quiet. And when you think you can see the full details, then start drawing. Do a rough outline first. Use a faint grid if necessary to get the perspective right. Nothing technical. Keep the outline simple, not making the head too big nor too small, and in proportion with the rest of the body. Notice the size of the chair, its angle, Clarke’s posture. Is his back straight or is he slouched? Notice the light coming in at an angle, how it strikes the face, and his back, how it is darker than the front. Always think of the light-source, the way it hits the object, and the way it casts a shadow behind the object. Start with the outline then work inwards, adding more detail. But again, keep it simple. You will be enhancing what you have drawn by adding colour. A rough sketch is all that is required at present.’

As he was saying this, Old Rennie had been going round the class,

walking in a circle behind the boys, looking over the shoulder at each one's work, deliberately leaving Jason till last. The others could hear a faint murmur of approval escape from his lips, or the sound of tutting, signifying his disapproval, each afraid to look up at him to see if it was he the teacher was referring to. The room was so quiet you could hear pencils scraping over paper. Even Old Rennie's footsteps could hardly be heard as if he was pacing round them like a lion stalking its prey, stealthily under the cover of darkness.

He paused when he came to Jason.

'Stop.' His one word cut the silence in half. 'Everyone put your pencils down. Now.'

The boys did as they were told, and looked up to see Mr Rennie was now behind Jason, hovering motionless. Jason also stopped and sat back, smugly.

'Come here, all of you,' he gesticulated to the rest. 'Now,' he barked.

You could hear the audible sound of chairs being scraped across the tiled floor as each boy pushed his chair back to get out of his seat.

'Gather round,' he beckoned.

All the boys formed a semi-circle behind the teacher and Jason, and were hanging on for his next word.

'This is how you should all be drawing,' he told them, pointing at Jason's creation.

It was a minimalist sketch, but what set it apart from the rest was the sheer draughtsmanship of its execution. In less than half an hour Jason had created a masterpiece, simple lines and curves which conveyed to the eyes an exquisite pleasure. A touch of light shading here, darker shading there, the hands and fingers drawn in such detail you could see the joints and the knuckles, the latter drawn rounded like small balls, adding a dimension and depth to a sketch drawn lightning quick, yet far exceeding the teacher's requirements, and only needing a slight dash of colour to finish it off. When coloured with watercolours it would be perfect.

The teacher simply patted Jason on the head and gesticulated for the rest to go back to their seats and resume their work.

'We'll talk later when the class has finished,' he whispered in his ear. Jason nodded and smiled.

'Well, explain yourself,' the teacher demanded afterwards. 'How did you accomplish that?'

'I just drew what I saw, sir,' he replied.

'Really! You don't expect me to believe that, do you? No one gets that good that quickly. Something tells me you were up to something during the holiday. What was it, I wonder.'

'I've been practicing, sir,'

‘Really,’ the teacher murmured again, and folded his arms behind his desk as if waiting for Jason to spill it all out and confess.

But the boy remained reticent.

‘Come on. You can tell me in confidence. The rest of the class has gone. No one else will hear except me. Tell me what you’ve been up to.’

‘I learned a few tricks,’ the boy replied, with a glimmer of a smirk on his lips.

‘You’ve been practising magic, haven’t you?’

The boy nodded and looked down.

‘I thought so. And where did you learn that from?’

‘In some books, sir.’

‘Books on magic?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I see. Would that have anything to do with Spare’s system?’

The boy nodded again, then said: ‘But some of them were quite vague. I had to fill in the gaps. I guessed at most of it and experimented.’

‘Until you found a way that worked?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, I told you, if you really are who I think you are, these things should come naturally to you. All you have to do is listen to the little voice in your head.’

‘I see, sir.’

‘As I said, the unconscious knows more about you than you do yourself, for it has been around a lot longer, and continues to live on when we’re gone from this world. So technically you are not just Spare in a previous life, you are also who ever he was before that, and before that, *ad infinitum*, for there is only one part of you which continues to exist after bodily death, a divine spark, a pure point of light, what the Hindus call *Atma*, the soul. Do you understand?’ The boy nodded. ‘And life is nothing but a conglomeration of these experiences, an aggregate that develops the soul and makes it what it is. All you have to do is find your soul and you will find your self and become who you really are.’

‘Yes, sir,’ the boy nodded again, not sure if what the man said made any sense.

‘Now run along to your next class. And we’ll have another one of our chats some other time.’

Jason was about to pick up the drawings he left on his master’s desk.

‘No, leave those,’ the master said. ‘I was rather hoping you would let me keep them, for the time being, that is.’

‘Yes, by all means, sir. I can always do some more.’

‘Good. That’s what I thought.’

The boy left, pleased with himself. After all, he not only showed his

teacher how good he was as an artist, but also the class. Soon the whole school will find out. Then what after that? What indeed!

Over the next few weeks Jason got into the habit of spending at least two hours each evening just drawing, allowing his unconscious full sway, conjuring up what ever images it chose, and let it flood out, whilst still retaining a degree of control. He learnt it was a fine line, a delicate balance between freedom and restraint. What he didn't want to do was to let it pour out in such a way as to look a mess, suggesting a child was having a tantrum with a crayon. That was not the way of the true artist, nor a genius, more like a maniac gone berserk. It required refinement, sophistication, obedience of the will, for will and imagination combined produce art.

In Spare's system these two, the will and the imagination, were symbolised by the hand and the eye. The will is the hand for it creates and produces. The eye is the seer for it sees, reproducing images for the mind. The mind feeds on images and symbols rather than words, because they came first, and one has to go beyond words to capture the essence of art. The hand and the eye have to work in tandem, but in such a way that it is above the conscious level.

It is rather like the driver of a car. The car should be able to run smoothly, as long as it has been properly maintained, and the driver simply puts his foot down and steers, directing the car where he wants it to go. Once it is in motion, the car keeps going, and the driver can even take pressure off the pedal, and it will still go, although not at the same speed and will eventually slow down to a halt. The act of driving over time becomes second-nature, practically automatic, therefore not on a conscious level. The artist is the driver; the hand and the eye are what makes the car work and makes it move, and is the vehicle for his expression.

When Jason went back to browsing at Spare's pictures once again, having accumulated only a few more copies, he started to notice how prominent both these symbols were. The hand and the eye seemed to be everywhere and in every picture. This is borne out in one of his most famous pictures where the hand and eye are central; a startling self-portrait of Spare. Jason discovered it last week.

It shows him staring directly at the viewer, his eyes fixed straight ahead, his right hand to his chin, his fingers blocking the nostrils, his other hand holding what looked like a quill in front of him writing on a scroll of paper, with all these weird objects and figures spread out on the table before him, supposedly representing things unleashed from his subconscious whilst in a form of trance.

Jason looked at the portrait again, and was soon entranced.



Yet there was something not quite right here, and he had a niggling doubt that wouldn't go away. He went back to the photos of Spare, the ones where he is working in his studio, and checked them. Then it hit. Spare was right-handed, but in the portrait he is using his left hand to write. They are reversed. It can only mean one thing: Spare used a mirror and drew his reflection! Jason was also to learn later this was what he called his 'Death Posture,' a pose he assumed for his automatic drawing, not that he was dead but rather approximating or imitating death, at least from the outside. Anyone seeing him would think he was dead, if it wasn't for the fact that his piercing eyes were open, and presumably his breathing was down to an absolute minimum, practically non-existent, again suggesting death.

Jason wished he came across this picture earlier. He could identify with it and knew instinctively this posture was the one Spare used for doing most of his drawings, again in a semi-trance or near catatonic state, and to all intents and purposes resembling death. Jason made up his mind he would mimic the same posture from now on; in that way he would not only identify with Spare but actually become Spare. Or so he hoped.

As his proficiency grew over time so did his confidence. With it came a greater belief in himself. There was no doubting now his artistic ability. During the whole of this term, and right up to Christmas, he was busy producing outstanding work, accumulating awards and praise from all quarters, not just the teachers but even the inspectors who visited the school on their rounds. They became ardent admirers, for no one could escape noticing his work. It was everywhere; pinned up on the walls of nearly every corridor, in all the classrooms, even Jason's painting of the headmaster, Mr Martin, no less, was hanging up in his room. The inspectors suggested it was time Jason exhibited his work properly, perhaps in the local gallery or even the Town Hall. Still only eleven, he was sure to garner admiration from the general public and win the appraisal of the local press. All this boded well for young Jason because it looked like he was going to be doing it before Spare did. Spare held his first public exhibition when he was about sixteen years of age. Jason would be beating him by at least four years.

Having concentrated on his artistic ability up till now, and achieving a relative degree of success, Jason decided he needed to focus his attention on those subjects he was not so good at, especially the most dreaded of all: mathematics! They say that maths is the language of the universe, for it doesn't matter where you are, whether you are on Earth, Mars, Pluto, or in another galaxy, $1 + 1$ will always equal 2. Basic maths he understood; he had no problem with that, but since the new term started they had moved on to algebra, a branch of maths he never could get to

grips with. If x plus y over c equals 2, then c must equal 3. What! How can you add a letter to a letter and get a number? Why not just say if 3 plus 3 equals 6, divided by 3 equals 2. That to him made more sense.

'Ah, but you see,' Mr Prince, his maths teacher would say, 'we are dealing with unknown quantities. We don't know what the quantities are so we have to use a letter to denote an unknown quantity.'

Yet worse was to come. Soon they would be moving onto quadratic equations, calculus, trigonometry, logarithms and other such nonsense, which Jason, as an artist would have no need of. As long as he could count, add, subtract, deal with simple things like bank balances and real money, then he had no use for abstracts. He already made his mind up: becoming an accountant was not on the cards anymore. Yet he had to concede, he was one of the worst pupils in the maths class, and was flagging behind by focusing on his art and neglecting this most important of subjects. It was all right for his father; he loved maths, and kept telling his precious son that some of the best philosophers in history were all mathematicians. 'Why?' he would ask his irate son, 'Because it develops the mind, and makes you think properly.'

Numbers are the cornerstone of thought, logic and rationality. This sounded like left-brain stuff, whereas art was right-brain stuff, the complete opposite, so therefore he and his dad had little in common.

Yet there was no excuse. He was going to have to put his mind to it if he wanted to get the best grades possible, across all subjects. Come half-term for Christmas he would be devoting his time to studying maths, and, with the help of a little magic, he hoped to be excelling in the subject come the start of the next term.

For Christmas, Jason's parents gave him a brand new bike. They considered that even though he was still eleven, he was now old enough to be responsible for it, and cycling to school would save him a few extra minutes. Although it only took ten minutes to walk there, he could now cycle there in less than five. It would be advantageous also, they said, if he was to get plenty of practice, get used to the bike, its braking, etc., and go out on it each day before returning to school. They also bought him a lock to go with it, and gave him very clear indications that because it was a new bike, potential thieves would find it highly desirable; so make sure it was always locked when not in use.

The bike also meant he could now cycle to the main library rather than having to take the bus. He decided he was going to go there each day, whilst it was still open over the holidays, as there was now a new research programme on the agenda: maths. The library had loads of educational books as it was also next door to the university and the students made full use of its facilities. And so would Jason. The maths

books his school provided were basic. He wanted more advanced ones which went beyond his academic level, the reason being that once he started doing magic to get good at maths he would need a good, sound mathematical structure, an understanding of how numbers really worked. It was no good just desiring to be proficient at the subject, he needed something in place, a grounding in the real world of numbers, in the same way that it was no good having a body of flesh if there were no bones or skeleton for the flesh to hang on, or desiring to be great at art if you couldn't even draw in the first place, or understand how to make the colours you wanted when it came to painting, or having a set of brushes you couldn't even use.

Magic worked on the principle of already having something there to work with. For example, if you desired great wealth, it would not do just to sit there and dream about it after you had performed a ritual to obtain wealth; you had to put opportunities in place, like going to bingo where you could win thousands of pounds on a good night. Or if there was a local lottery each weekend, it was no good hoping you would win unless you bought a ticket. The same with Premium Bonds. If you didn't but any, you weren't going to win. Or the Football Pools; if you didn't play, then don't expect to receive a large cheque through the door. You had to gamble if you wanted to win. When working magic you are not asking the universe to do you favours; you are persuading the gods (those wild, inscrutable forces) to help you in your endeavours by putting a structure in place for the magic to work. That's all he was doing, by making sure he understood the subject through plenty of reading.

Jason devoted each evening to maths, starting with the basics. He was then going to move on to more advanced equations. Simply doing basic maths (adding, subtracting, multiplication and division) both on paper and in his head, and without using a calculator (except for checking his sums were right), kept him busy over the Christmas period. He was afraid to work with a sigil as he feared he needed some understanding first, or otherwise he would have what happened last time with his sigil for art, and all these equations would be pouring out of his head and become uncontrollable.

Once he had mastered the basics, he thought the time was now right. Besides there was only three days left before returning to school. He did exactly the same as before, choosing early evening to perform the ritual, and prior to having tea.

He wrote out the simple sentence: 'I DESIRE THE POWER OVER NUMBERS,' and crossed off any repeating letters. The remainder he formed into a sigil, drawing it thrice until he had a more simplified version of his desire, and committed it to memory. He took up Spare's

Death Posture, closing his eyes and stilling his breath and imagined seeing the sigil before him, blazing with a bright white light for several seconds until he could hold it no more, and let it drop, imagining that it was sinking into a vast abyss below. He then jumped up, clapped his hands and went downstairs for tea.

‘You look pleased with yourself,’ his mother remarked as she handed him his plate at the table.

‘He’s being seeing that girl again, that’s what it is,’ his father joked.

They all had a good chuckle over it, but Jason wasn’t saying a word. He just sat there munching away; the food took his mind off the sigil. In fact, it didn’t even enter his head.

Well fed, he curled up on the sofa and watched some telly with his parents, his mind not really on the programme they were watching; it was wondering off exploring the new year before it had even begun. He was thinking of all the possibilities of what it might bring, and like any kid, he was looking forward to it with a positive attitude. He had the whole of his future ahead of him, and a feeling that he could accomplish anything. For an eleven year old, his ambitions were already firmly in place. He wasn’t going to be messing around, playing football with the other kids, or getting involved in crime like some of the others he knew, or engage in petty pastimes; his mind was set on a far higher purpose.

He was trying to figure out what that was when his father picked up the remote and switched channels.

‘What’s this?’ the boy asked him.

‘It’s a programme I want to watch about accountancy.’

‘Do we have to watch this?’ his wife complained.

Jason was thinking the same. It would be boring and his dad would be going on about it afterwards, with things like, ‘See, son, accountancy can be fun.’ Really? Jason would never believe that such a dry subject to do with numbers could ever be exciting. Then something twigged in the back of his mind. And as he started watching he soon knew what it was. Numbers! Numbers all over the screen. It brought back to him the little ritual he performed just before dinner. And sure enough, it all came flooding in. His mind was swirling with numbers just watching the TV, seeing how computers were now being used by all accountancy firms. Even chartered accountants were scrapping their calculators and buying their own personal computers. The banks were updating their systems by installing new computers. Everything would be on the mainframes and available at the click of a button. It was estimated that one day computers would be able to ‘think’ quicker than the human brain, and do sums incalculably fast, not in a matter of seconds but in nano-seconds, whatever they were. The narrator then talked about how spreadsheets, which

had been done manually for years, were now available as software packages. All you had to do was assign a function to a cell and it would calculate all the figures in the previous rows and columns.

As Jason watched all he could see were numbers, not just on the TV screen, but on the buttons next to it, and on the clock sitting on the mantelpiece, on the face of his wristwatch, on the remote control lying on his dad's lap, on the video recorder under the telly, everywhere he looked there were numbers. He started counting the number of bricks on the exposed fireplace, working out their dimension, their size, even their weight.

Frightened, as if he could feel the onset of madness come upon him, he jumped out of his seat.

'What's the matter, son?' his concerned father asked him.

'Nothing,' the boy stammered. 'I'm going to have an early night.'

'You do that, son.'

'Yes. Off to bed and get some sleep,' his mother chipped in. 'You don't want to watch this boring programme. It's just about numbers.'

'Ugh!' he wanted to scream. Numbers, and more numbers.

He dashed out of the room and started climbing up the stairs, those stairs he had been up and down every day, God knows how many times, ever since he first learned to walk, and realised he was now counting them. He had never done that before! There were eleven of them. Each one was seven inches high and three feet across, totalling seventy-seven inches in height, or 6.4167 feet. The eleventh step was a mini-landing, measuring seven by three. Then he turned ninety degrees to the left and hit three more steps and rose another twenty-one inches above ground level, before coming to the landing proper which measured

'Ugh!' he really did scream, and ran into his bedroom, slamming the door firmly behind him, leaning against it as if he was holding on to it for dear life. The giddiness came upon him, stronger this time. Was he going to faint? Again, everywhere he looked were numbers. The clock by his bed, a big LCD display with glowing digits in red. Then he looked to his bed. It was covered with a bedspread with a quilted pattern, made up of square sections measuring five by five. Before he knew it, he was counting how many sections were going across and how many down its full length, and calculating the total area, measuring approximately ...

'Ugh!' he screamed again, and threw himself on the bed, kicking and screaming and closing his eyes, trying to shut out the numbers. But they kept pouring in, even with his eyes closed. He could see streams of them, a panoply of them, rolling before his eyes, long equations written in white chalk on a blackboard which seemed to go on forever. Then the value of π popped into his head. It was:

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510
58209749445923078164062862089986280348253421170679 ...

‘Ugh!’ he screamed again, rolling onto his back, his head in his hands, trying to block out the numbers. But they kept coming. Number theory (rational numbers, whole numbers, perfect numbers, prime numbers, natural numbers, real numbers, complex numbers, integers), all the mathematical symbols (plus, minus, multiply, divide, equal, greater than, less than, intersection, union, square root, infinity, ratio, sines, cosines, tangents, product, mean, integral, etc.), Fermat’s Last Theorem, the Fibonacci Sequence, conversion tables (inches into centimetres, feet into metres, miles into kilometres, gallons into litres, ounces into grams, Fahrenheit into Celsius, pounds into kilograms, tons into tonnes, etc.), SI metric units of measurement, factoring, geometry, pie charts, cones, sections ...

‘Ugh!’ he screamed out again. ‘Stop, please stop,’ he begged as if his mind was going to blow a fuse any minute. He screamed once more before finally blacking out.

‘My God, you look terrible,’ his mother told him when he came down for breakfast. ‘Didn’t you sleep well last night?’ she asked, brushing his hair off his face.

He shook his head and sat down at the table, not even sure if his stomach could take anything, especially his favourite: Shreddies. No, it couldn’t. He pushed the bowl away.

‘Aren’t you hungry, dear?’ she asked, concerned.

He shook his head again.

‘Oh dear. You’re not ill, are you?’

He shook his head again. ‘No, I just had a bad night.’

‘It looks like it. Sounded it like it as well, as if you were having a nightmare. We could hear you crying out, “stop,” “no,” “please.” What was going on?’

‘It was just a bad dream.’

It certainly was. From what he could remember he lost consciousness on top of his bed, and was left with an almighty headache as if his head had split in half. It was all very well using this system of magic, but if you couldn’t control it and ended up going insane then what good would that do. It felt like a floodgate had opened and all this stuff was pouring through, like a tidal wave, and so strong he couldn’t close the gate. The door to the secret room opened last night. It stayed open and he didn’t know how to shut it. Now he wished he hadn’t opened it in the first place. And the only reason he managed to come out of his catalepsy was because the torrent, after god-knows-how-many hours, turned into a

trickle, allowing him about two hours of respite, hardly sufficient to allow for a full recovery. What was he going to do now?

‘What are you going to do now?’ his mother echoed his thoughts. ‘You’ve got all day to yourself, then it’s back to school tomorrow.’

‘I think I’m going to do some studying. We’ve got our placement exams next week.’

‘And so you have. You must do well this year so at the start of your second year they put you in the G-Stream.’

She was referring to the top stream where all the brainy boys were taught. ‘G’ didn’t stand for genius, but it might as well have as you had to be really good at every subject to be in that class. Only about 5% of the boys were selected each year out of the whole school. The rest were split into the other divisions: A for dunces, B for slow learners, C for average, D for above average, E for intelligent, and F for academically proficient, or something like that. He never did understand the system. As he was poor in maths, history and science, as well as geography, he was stuck in D. To jump to G he would have to pull his socks up and pay better attention in class. The other teachers thought he had it in him, yet wasn’t showing any keenness towards these subjects. And they were right, because he hated them. They were too rational, like science which is the most rational of them all. Again, it was something he was going to have to sort out. But one subject at a time.

He was pleased with his art. He proved to everyone he was good at it. Now he needed to get his head round maths, do loads of swatting up and turn his hatred of the subject into pure love. Because he couldn’t understand maths was probably the reason why he hated it. To him, it was a waste of time anyway. What had he, the artist that he was, to do with quadratic equations or number crunching? It all seemed so utterly pointless—unless he was going to be an accountant when he grew up.

‘I’d rather be an astronaut,’ he said to himself. But even they have to be good at science and engineering which requires a certain degree of mathematical ability. He had seen astrophysicists doing these really long equations trying to work out the mass of the sun, or calculating how many millions, if not billions, of stars there are in the universe. Estimates ranged from between 200 to 400 billion stars in the Milky Way alone. This was only one out of 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Using the Milky Way as an average, this would give roughly 3 times 10²⁴ stars, which equalled something like three septillion. Or, to put it another way, about the same number as grains of sand on Earth. And that’s quite a lot.

He went back to basics again. He started at the bottom doing simple arithmetic, then fractions, getting to grips with lowest common denominators, pie charts, averages, means, mediums, medians, then

logarithms, algebraic fractions, working out the area of a circle, a rectangle, then a cone. Calculating how many litres of water would be needed to fill a swimming pool measuring fifteen metres by twenty with a depth of five. How long it would take a rocket, travelling at an average speed of 2000 miles an hour to reach the moon from the Earth, a distance of about 238,855 miles. And many other calculations, all done on paper without using a calculator. By lunchtime he felt he was really getting into it as if somehow his loathing for the subject was slowly dissolving, melting away like ice near a furnace. He could feel in himself a certain admiration for numbers as if he had never seen that potentiality before, never being aware of what use they could be put, even when it came to something simple like building a bridge. You needed maths to do it, to work out the length, breadth, the height and the strength needed to make it safe for all the cars, trucks, lorries (including their payloads), etc. It was even becoming something of a hoot. He was actually starting to enjoy it. But all he wanted to do in the afternoon was carry out sums in his head. That was something different. It was easy on paper. Doing it mentally was another matter altogether.

After lunch, his studying resumed. Whilst doing algebra he actually caught himself saying, 'Hey, maths can be fun,' which was totally unlike him. Okay, he still had a long way to go, but he reckoned he could show them all in class tomorrow he could now do in a matter of minutes what would have taken him last year well over an hour. It was all to do with understanding the principles. Once they were in place he could move up another level, and was progressing so well he reckoned he was going to outsmart the rest of the class and show that Mr Prince a thing or two. In the past his maths teacher used to make fun of him, usually because little Jason always seemed to come bottom. He remembered making him recite his seven times table at the front of the class. Nerves got to him (he hated being the centre of attention) and began faltering halfway through. Well this time it was going to be different. He was so confident now he was sure that Princey-Wincey (as he called him) would be dumbstruck, flabbergasted, flummoxed, discombobulated, and all those other old-fashioned superlatives he liked to use. There was now no holding back; Jason was on a roll. He was doing mental arithmetic even when he was in bed, trying to fall asleep. Whatever he did yesterday, his little ritual had worked.

Chapter Eight

‘Now remember, Jason, as we said before, make sure you lock your bike up at school. We don’t want anybody pinching it, do we?’

‘No, Mum,’ he replied as his mother gave him a peck on the cheek.

And off he rode to school with a big smile on his face. He normally hated the first day back. It was like the holidays were never long enough; they seemed to go by too quickly. And next thing you know you’re back in class. ‘Well, I’ve only got another four years to go,’ he said to himself, and he reckoned those would go by pretty quickly as well. He was told by everyone and anyone who was older than him that when you get to a certain age, time flies by. It seemed to be flying by already as he whizzed his way round the back to the bike sheds. Locking his bike up, he fairly skipped into school, his little satchel bouncing on his back.

As luck would have it, after assembly and a boring speech by Mr Martin, the headmaster, that went on and on, they received their new rotas for the year, and maths was going to be the first lesson of the day.

‘Brilliant,’ Jason was heard to exclaim, as he folded up his rota and put it in his pocket.

Mr Prince, who must have been older than Mr Rennie, reminded Jason of a stick insect. He was tall and thin and always dressed in the same drab grey jacket, the one with leather patches on the elbows. His hair matched the shade of grey of his jacket. It was always slicked back and kept in place with Brylcreem. He stunk of it, and the Old Spice aftershave he always used.

It was a ritual of his that as soon as he entered the classroom, Mr Prince would stand erect behind his desk, and everyone had to say, ‘Good morning, Mr Prince,’ before he sat down.

He was a strict disciplinarian, and forbade any talking in class. Nor did he refrain from smacking the boys or giving them a clip round the ear if they were unruly. He once caught a boy scratching his name on one of the desks, and was so irked by it he practically picked the boy up single-handed and booted him out of the class. For that, the boys always made sure they were respectful towards him. And they always had to answer, 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir.'

His long arms would go up behind his head, cradling the back of it in his hands, as he leant back and stared at the ceiling, then shouting out a boy's name whilst not actually looking at him. The boy would then have to stand up and answer a question. Usually that boy was Jason because he liked to pick on him, with the intention of making him look stupid in front of the rest of the class.

This morning was no different. He shouted out 'Jones,' and the poor boy got to his feet.

'Yes, sir?'

'What's seven nines?'

'Sixty-three, sir.'

'Eleven eights?'

'Eighty-eight, sir.'

'Thirteen sixes?'

'Seventy-eight, sir.'

And so it went on, Jason answering quickly and accurately every time, the teacher's eyes only occasionally glancing in his direction. After some more grilling, Mr Prince's hand came out from behind his head and gestured for young Jason to sit down. He sat, satisfied.

'Clarke!' he shouted.

The boy nervously got to his feet.

'Seven sevens?'

'Uh ... Forty-nine, sir.'

'Eight fives?'

'Forty-five. I mean, forty, sir.'

The rest of the class sniggered.

'Quiet,' Mr Prince demanded. 'Sit down, lad. Now for the rest of you, that was only a warming up session. Now we're going to get down to the nitty-gritty.'

'Nitty-gritty' was another one of his favourite phrases which he used often. It was old-fashioned, just like him.

'Algebra!' he bellowed.

There were sighs and 'Oh no's' from everyone in the class, except Jason. This was something he was looking forward to.

Mr Prince handed out their exercises, a set of twenty questions, and

gave the class half an hour to answer them. They had to do their working out on a separate sheet of paper and put their answers on the main page in the space provided, then hand back both afterwards.

Since Jason had already gone through all this basic stuff, it was now child's play. He answered every question in the space of twenty-five minutes with five minutes to spare. He used that time to double-check his answers and look around to see if he was the first to finish—he evidently was. Time up, everyone was ordered to put down their pens. Jason was asked to collect the papers and bring them to the teacher's desk. He made sure his answers were at the top of the pile. They were then instructed to turn to their exercise books and read silently the chapter on 'Fractions in Algebra' whilst Mr Prince marked their papers.

Jason couldn't help notice the teacher kept glancing in his direction. He was obviously marking his paper, checking it against Jason's working out sheet, and gave him a rather quizzical look now and then. Jason pretended he hadn't noticed and went back to his book with a smirk. He really wanted to yawn as again this was all childish stuff. He could now do algebraic fractions blindfolded; they were that simple.

A few minutes later Mr Prince got out of his chair and picked up all the papers and started handing them back to the boys. If the marks were good, he would give the boy a polite smile. If poor, he would shake his head as if to say 'Must try harder,' and deliberately left Jason's paper till last. He put it on his desk, pointed to his mark (twenty out of twenty, heavily underlined) and then turned to the page where Jason had worked out the answers. He pointed to one of them, then looked at Jason and said one word, 'Ingenious,' then went back to his desk.

Jason could not help but be pleased with himself. He was now winning Mr Prince's approval. That could only be a good sign. It also looked like he was the one person in the whole class who got all the answers right, with many boys getting only seventeen or eighteen correct. And it was the one Mr Prince called 'ingenious' in his paper the others all got wrong. But he wasn't going to get on his high horse yet. He still had much more work to do. He may have achieved a modicum of success, yet there was still a long way to go. But at least it proved his little ritual had been effective. He now had the power over numbers; it was then simply a matter of extending that power so it could be applied to all branches of mathematics.

Unfortunately, there was no art class today. A pity, as Jason was looking forward to seeing Old Rennie. He wanted to see the look on the man's face when he found out how well he was now doing in maths, a subject Old Rennie knew the boy hated. Nor was there a class tomorrow. In fact, not till Friday, and that was an all afternoon session.

But as luck would have it, Jason arrived at school the next day to find a small note placed in his desk. The message was simple: ‘Come and see me at lunch time,’ and signed ‘R.’ Jason knew what this was about. Word would have got round to the teachers about how he was the only pupil in the whole class who answered all twenty questions correctly in a subject where normally he was lucky to get a third right on average. Mr Rennie must’ve heard about it. Now, what was the boy going to tell him?

A single knock on his door. A single word ‘Come,’ and the next thing he knew he was now standing in Mr Rennie’s study, the old man poised behind his desk.

His art teacher didn’t get up. He just sat there staring at the boy. Jason couldn’t really tell whether the man was smiling or smirking under that big moustache of his. He waited for the man to speak.

‘There you are, my lad,’ his voice rich and sonorous.

‘Yes, sir,’ he replied, pretending not to know what was coming next.

‘They’ve been telling me you did rather well in maths yesterday. Now, you and I, we both know you loathe the subject. So what have you been doing, my lad?’

‘Swatting up, sir, all over Christmas.’

‘And?’ It was uttered with a stern look, as if to say, ‘Out with it, lad!’

‘And with a bit of help, sir.’

‘That’s what I thought. When I heard about it, I assumed, incorrectly of course, you may have cheated. But how could you when you didn’t know the questions beforehand. So there was only one way you could’ve done that well, and that was through a little magic. You are obviously getting quite good at it now.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Got the hang of it, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And what to do you intend to do with it now you know it works? Apply it to all subjects?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s what I thought. But be careful. You are only young. It is a fine line between genius and insanity. The people we call mad are the ones who have let loose the unconscious. They are overwhelmed by it, until the conscious mind is completely flooded. Your brand of magic, or I should say Spare’s, works specifically with the unconscious and its powers, and these have to be controlled, under the will at all times.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So I suggest, before moving on to your next conquest, you strengthen your will.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Until it is firmly resolved. And don’t try to run before you can walk properly, otherwise you will end up in a loony bin. Do you understand what I am saying?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You are dealing with powers which are impersonal, that go beyond the ego. The ego is simply a device, a social construct, designed to allow us to interact with others. It is also very fragile and can disintegrate if over-exposed to these powers. It is also, at the same time, subservient to these powers, and refuses to recognise this. It thinks it is the master of the house when it is only the servant and will do all in its power to stay being a master. It sets itself up in opposition to these powers and this is where the conflict lies. To perform proper magic the ego has to be absent. It has to be temporarily displaced, held in abeyance to allow the powers to work through into the conscious mind. Now, I’m sure you will discover that for yourself as you grow older. Being as young as you are you still have a lot to learn. There is a whole universe out there for you to explore and you have plenty of time ahead of you to explore it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Now run along my lad. I’m sure you must be hungry. And if you get any problems don’t be afraid to come and see me.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

He was dismissed from this ‘lesson’ and made his way back to the dining hall, joining the other boys in silence. They all looked at him and waited for him to spill the beans about why Old Rennie would want to see him, and he only, alone. He preferred not to let them know, well, at least not yet, and got out his packed lunch and started to eat when he noticed one of the older boys, at the other end of the hall, was staring at him. It was Cavanagh, two years his senior. He had a reputation for being a hard nut, irascible and prone to violence. Most of the other boys tended to avoid him for that very reason. Jason ignored him, and looked away. He wasn’t going to let Cavanagh get to him. Yet the more he tried to ignore him, the more he kept looking in the young boy’s direction. Jason was trying to work out what his problem was. The others noticed too.

Then Cavanagh got out of his chair, purposefully pushing it back hard against the wooden floor, making a scraping sound which echoed round the hall. Everyone could hear it and all eyes were now fixed on him. Instead of heading directly to the exit, he made a beeline for Jason’s table, his eyes set firmly on the young boy. All eyes followed him to see what he was going to do. The hall went incredibly quiet. Eyes were staring. Mouths were not eating or talking; they were agape, motionless like a video on pause. As Cavanagh approached Jason’s table he started to shake his head from side to side, his eyes deliberately penetrating into

his. Jason could feel his heartbeat. It was getting quicker as if switching into panic mode. He could feel blood pumping round his ears making them burn and his face turn red. But he was determined not to show any real outward visible sign of fear. Besides, Cavanagh would never do anything in public. He always caught his opponents when they were off-guard and alone, usually tapping them on the shoulder, and as soon they turned round to see who it was Cavanagh would punch them hard in the face. It was cowardly and despicable but that's how he garnered this reputation of being a hard nut. Jason wasn't afraid, just worried. The one thing he didn't want to do was to get on the wrong side of Crazy Cavanagh. But he needn't be worried this time. Cavanagh kept shaking his head at him then walked past and exited. Jason was relieved. You could almost feel the tension in the air melt away. Everyone went back to what they were doing, kind of disappointed that nothing happened.

'What was that all about?' he asked Charlie, sitting opposite.

'That's Cavanagh!' his friend replied.

'I know it was. So?' he asked.

'He's the maths champion of the whole school.'

'It's the only subject he's good at,' little Nelson chipped in.

'He obviously heard about your results in maths, yesterday,' Charlie continued. 'If there's one thing he hates, it's rivalry.'

'He's just jealous,' Jason defended himself.

'This school ain't big enough for two maths champions,' little Nelson warned him.

I don't know about that, Jason thought to himself. But that's all he needed, another jealous pupil who couldn't handle a bit of competition.

What would Spare do in this situation, he wondered. Would he resort to some form of black magic? Put a curse on him? Isn't that what all them witches were supposed to do, go around cursing everyone in the village who got in their way? It was something Jason would never resort to. He was far too intelligent to stoop to such petty means. He was going to have to box clever with Cavanagh. For the time being, he thought the best solution would be to avoid clashing with him at all costs. It would not be worth putting his life in jeopardy all because some other boy had some high opinion of himself which was probably over-exaggerated to begin with. But it would be interesting, he thought, to deflate his ego. What was it Old Rennie had said about the ego? It was fragile and therefore vulnerable. If anything, what was needed was for Cavanagh to be brought down a peg or two, and made to realise he was not the only one in school who could be good at maths.

Jason soon forgot about him, especially in the afternoon. They had a geography lesson and the teacher, Mr Ingles, was going on about isobars,

cold weather fronts, warm weather fronts, jet streams, tundras, heat-waves, permafrost, drought, and other serious weather conditions. It was all a bit too much for the young boy who was now only dreaming of being an artist. What need he of knowing where Timbuktu was, unless of course he was to hold an exhibition there. Or all these other places he heard of and would probably never visit in his lifetime.

But he resolved in his mind that in the evening he would do some studying. He decided he was going to get a big atlas and learn these names and where they all were off by heart.

He did just that, spreading out a map of the world on his bedroom floor. He would glance over it then close his eyes to see if he could see the land mass of the USA in his mind, all the rivers, all the mountains, all the States and each of their capitals, then try to write them down. It was useless. He couldn't even remember half of them. He needed help.

A little bit of magic would do the trick. But how was he to word it? 'I DESIRE POWER OVER THE WORLD'? No, that sounded too much like a megalomaniac. Why not 'I DESIRE TO KNOW THE WORLD'? That didn't sound right either. He had to be careful in the words he chose for they would shape the desire and in turn shape the outcome. Then how about something a bit more specific like 'I DESIRE TO KNOW ALL NAMES AND PLACES'? That would do, he thought, at least for the time being, as long as he had a map in his head with all the names of each town, each river, each city, each country, and each continent.

He formulated his desire, charged it, dropped it, then went downstairs to tea, his mind now completely empty.

After dinner, as was the usual custom, he sat and watched some television with his parents. Luckily the programme had nothing to do with accountancy or any other boring subject; it was a silly old sitcom set in Surbiton. But that name never even entered his head. He had no idea where it was, except nowhere near where he lived, and because it was silly and funny it took his mind off everything else, even Cavanagh and his schoolboy antics, with his 'I'm the king of the castle; you're not' attitude, which was ridiculous.

As the programme finished his dad switched over to watch the news. He was an avid fan of the news, and always liked to know what was going on in the world, especially in the world of politics, another subject Jason loathed as it all seemed such trivial nonsense, particularly those people in Parliament who seemed to act like grown up kids, shouting and bickering at each other, each claiming they were somehow better than the opposition. He didn't care for politics. Perhaps because it was also a bit too grown up for his liking. Where was the fun in being a Member of Parliament anyway, or having to campaign to get elected, representing

your constituency, and helping to run the country?

He was about to dream on when the news finished and the weather report came on. First was shown a map of Britain with a cold front coming in from the East, then a map of Europe, then the United States, and suddenly it all came flooding back to him, all the names of the States, their capitals, even the approximate populations. He could feel all this information pouring in bringing with it a state of giddiness. And as soon as he started feeling that he knew he was in trouble. All he could do was quickly kiss his parents goodnight and rush upstairs, slamming the bedroom door behind him. Not that this was any safer, for there before him was the damn map, still lying on the floor face up, all the countries visible, all their names leaping off it and swirling round in the air, then being projected on to his bedroom walls in big glowing letters:

Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii ...

'Ugh!' he screamed, but they still continued. Then the counties of Northern Ireland:

Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Tyrone.

'Ugh!' he screamed again, the words whizzing round his head then flattening on the wall as if being projected from the map. Now he could see all the counties of England:

Avon, Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Cleveland, Cornwall, Cumbria, Derbyshire ...

'Ugh!' he screamed again, the words still whizzing round until all forty-five were listed.

Then all the countries of the world, and their capitals:

Afghanistan (Kabul), Albania (Tirana), Algeria (Algiers), Andorra (Luanda), Antigua (St. Johns), Argentina (Buenos Aires), Australia (Canberra), Austria (Vienna) ...

'Ugh!' he screamed, throwing himself on his bed, clutching at the sheets, his eyes rolling, but still they continued ...

Bahamas (Nassau), Bahrain (Manama), Bangladesh (Dacca), Barbados (Bridgetown), Belgium (Brussels) ...

'Stop, please stop.'

He closed his eyes, hoping they would go away. But they wouldn't. Now he could hear them.

Belize (Belmopan), Benin (Porto Novo), Bermuda (Hamilton), Bhutan (Thimbu), Bolivia (La Plaz) ...

'Stop,' he cried, covering his ears in the vain hope he couldn't hear them. But they still kept coming through, like a voice in his head, nauseating, and as bad as the worst case of tinnitus ...

Botswana (Gaborone), Brazil (Brasilia), Brunei (Bandar Seri

Begawan), Bulgaria (Sofia) ...

'No, no, no,' he cried, begging for mercy. But there was no letting up, not until all 187 countries and their capitals came, listed alphabetically, with the world's mountain ranges (their names, heights, etc.), and all the rivers, etc., until he must have eventually fallen asleep.

'God, you look terrible,' his mother noted when he came down for breakfast. 'Have you been having another one of your nightmares?'

All he could do was nod and plump himself down at the table. He yawned and shook his head trying to wake up. But he doubted if he even slept last night. If he did, then it must have been later on. All he could remember was the words, not only seeing them but hearing them. He asked to know all the names of places: that's what he got, and much more besides, in profusion, not just snippets of information, but all of it in one big drop, not a dollop he could've handled, but a whole reservoir full, and the result was information overload. It hurt, making his head feel sore like it had been crushed in a vice, with ringing in his ears. He wondered, as he tried to eat his breakfast, if this was going to happen every time he did his little ritual. But at least it worked, and the first lesson of the day was geography. Thank God, he thought, because he was going to show that teacher, Mr Ingles, not only did he know all the States of America off by heart, but also all their capitals, and the capitals and countries of the rest of the world.

And that's precisely what he did, despite having a heavy head.

Mr Ingles was impressed. He had never seen a boy so keen as young Jason, who was rolling out all these names without any visual prompt, not only giving the state capitals in alphabetical order, but also going geographically from east to west, from north to south, and vice versa, as if the boy had a map of the country in his head. Had he become a genius all of a sudden? Or did he have a photographic memory? That was the only way he could explain it. Either way, the teacher begrudgingly gave him full marks, for there was no way he could have cheated.

Word soon got round to other teachers about this new boy-genius. It simply made Mr Rennie smile.

Chapter Nine

God, how I hate French, Jason thought to himself. It wasn't that he didn't like the French, or the Frogs, as the other boys called them, nor was he a Francophile either. It wasn't that he could not get his head round why certain words had accents (aigu, grave, circonflexe and tréma) over the vowels whereas others didn't, or that he got confused between 'tu' and 'vous.' It was just that he didn't like the teacher, Madame Fantuffe, or, as the older boys called her, Madame Fanny-Tuft, and would often giggle over that name, for reasons Jason never understood. And like some of the other teachers, she was always picking on him, making him look small in front of the class. Was it his fault he wasn't some expert linguist, that he couldn't pronounce the words properly, and unable to roll his R's like Old Rennie could? If he was meant to speak French then surely he would have been born in France, and not England where English was the common language. And as the great artist he was destined to be, what use would he have of this stupid language anyway, unless of course he was to move to France and study under some great teacher down by the Champs Elysée who would probably tell him to practice painting the Arc de Triomphe. He could imagine living in Paris at the end of the last century, visiting the Moulin Rouge, sketching the dancers, just like Toulouse-Lautrec, or staying in one of those artist studios, the ones in the loft with big glass panels in the ceiling to let in more light, even perhaps drinking absinthe with Gauguin or Renoir or the sculptor Rodin, and watching old plays by Racine in one of the big theatres. Was it because we're neighbours with the country that we have to learn its damn language? Do the French have to learn English? So they should. For he considered English to be a superior language in itself, and so much easier

to learn. But then he would say that since he was English.

It would be far better to learn the classics like Latin or Greek as so many of our words are based on these ancient languages. Even the word television, a modern invention, is both Greek and Latin, or the word 'religion,' from the Latin 'religare,' with its implicit meaning of 'binding to God.' He could understand that, and found the origins of words, their etymologies, a fascinating subject and believed the only way you can understand English words was by breaking them down to their roots. For example, conspire, whence we get conspiracy, comes from the Latin 'con,' meaning 'with,' and 'spire,' meaning 'to breathe,' so a conspiracy essentially means a 'breathing together.' But his admiration for these languages, and English in particular, which he had no problems learning, suffering no major difficulty during the lessons, did not extend to French. His loathing for the teacher did not help either.

Being French she had this peculiar sense of humour, very different from us English. She would crack a joke, in either French or English, and expected everyone to appreciate it and laugh. Those who attempted to keep on her good side did accordingly, those who didn't, like Jason, deliberately refrained from laughing, possibly another reason why she picked on him. Everyone was supposed to laugh at her unfunny jokes. Nobody particularly liked her. It wouldn't have been so bad if she was attractive. Most French women usually are, he thought to himself. So why wasn't she? He wanted to complain to the Board of Directors and say, 'Could we please have a nice French teacher who is at least easy on the eye?' Also, they were supposed to be hot-blooded, sexy, and have men drooling over them, these French women in their French knickers with their French kissing. She wasn't. She was the complete opposite; short and unshapely, with brown hair which was parted like a boy's to the left and cropped tight around her unattractive face. She never wore any make-up—that would help!—and always wore trousers. The others said that she probably had hairy legs as she couldn't be bothered to shave them, that's why she never wore a skirt, and these horrible flat shoes resembling loafers. Not the sort of woman any man would want to marry, and being unmarried led to rumours that she was one of them funny women who prefer their own kind, just like the funny men his dad told him about. Another thing; her English, although not great, was stifled by her inability to pronounce certain words properly, thanks to her strong accent. It grated on his ears, that horrible gravelly voice of hers, as if someone was strangling a chicken.

'Jones,' she shouted to him at the back of the class (he always sat at the back hoping she couldn't see him, a somewhat useless ploy), 'I want you to stand up and tell the rest of the class your name in French.'

What a pointless exercise, he thought. He did as he was told and stood up, perfectly aware everyone was watching him. They couldn't wait for him to make a mistake.

'Je m'appelle Jason Jones.'

He thought he said it perfectly. Yet she was far from happy with his pronunciation, making him repeat his 'je' over and over again, then his 'm'appelle,' until the phrase rolled off his tongue. Only then was he allowed to sit down.

Then she complained he had not been gesticulating nearly enough. The French love to use their hands, apparently, wildly gesticulating in an exaggerated manner so as to ram home the point. She made them watch a short film demonstrating just that, a Frenchman talking about his love of food (the French live to eat, whereas the English eat to live, she said), then made the whole class repeat his words in French along with his body-language, so there were wild gesticulations everywhere.

With his placement exams coming up next week, he was worried that French was going to hold him back. He would never get to the beloved G-Stream if he couldn't master its basics. But as the exams involved both written and oral, it was something he was going to have to deal with. Maybe a little help was in order.

At home he pondered the question again, whether it was too soon after the previous ritual if he could handle a massive surge like the last time. It fairly conked him out and left him feeling sore. But that was only because the memory had been triggered by watching the weather report. If he hadn't seen that, surely his desire would have remained in the subconscious and filtered out slowly, gradually, not bombarding his consciousness like it did. Besides, there were no French programmes on telly tonight. But maybe a French film. He checked the listings. As he thought, nothing on at all involving French, so there would be no trigger mechanism to bring it on. He would do a ritual before tea, go downstairs, eat, and watch a bit of telly. That appeared to be the best way to do it.

He gathered up what French exercise books he had, spending a good hour browsing through them to get familiar with the words, then put them away in his drawer where they would be out of sight. What he didn't want to happen was to be reminded of the subject. Last time he foolishly left the map out and went through geography hell afterwards. This time he would be more cautious.

He wrote out his desire, 'I DESIRE TO KNOW FRENCH,' which he thought was straightforward enough, and sigilised it, charged it, dropped it, forgot it, and went downstairs for tea.

'You look pleased with yourself,' his mother prompted him at dinner, hoping to elicit a full response. All she got was little Jason nodding and

beaming and happily eating up his food.

They sat down afterwards and watched television. There wasn't much on. Dad was in charge of the remote. He kept flicking through all the channels impatiently, trying to find something of interest, whilst Mum sat in her armchair doing her knitting as usual. There was nothing on any of the four channels; only a quiz programme, the music charts (Jason never got into music), a boring programme about combine harvesters, and a cookery programme. All in English. Thank God. His little ritual was firmly in the back of his mind now and he couldn't even remember doing it or what it was he was supposed to have forgotten about. He wasn't thinking of anything. After half an hour of rubbish Dad switched channels to watch the nine o'clock news. Oh no, Jason thought. Please no. There was a major accident in Montreal which had seen one of the worst winters ever recorded. A plane came in to land and slipped on the snowbound runway, overshooting it by several hundred yards and skidding into an embankment. Several people were killed, with many casualties. A news-reporter was doing a live link from the airport and speaking to an eyewitness who could only speak ... FRENCH!

Jason tried to block out the man's voice. He pretended he couldn't hear it. But the words were coming through. It did not help either that there were subtitles on the screen, and all of a sudden he found himself translating the English text back into French, and in the man's accent! Despite only being on for a few seconds, they were enough to trigger a whole plethora of associations. He tried taking his mind off it and diverted his attention elsewhere, but it was useless. The magazine his mother was using for a knitting pattern had the title 'Elle.' French! The bottles of wine on the sideboard were bottles of Chablis. French! The watch his father was wearing was a Cartier, something he bought last year when he was in France!

He had enough. He ran upstairs to his room. Although the power surge wasn't as tremendous as last time, it was still powerful enough to make him feel giddy. His hands started shaking. The floodgate had opened, and all little Jason could do was nothing except lie on his bed, close his ears, and be forced to listen to interminable French phrases as they started coming through thick and fast:

'Comment allez-vous, je te présente, à plus tard, bonsoir, bon après-midi, bonjour, au revoir, bon anniversaire, quelle heure est-il, à huit heures vingt-cinq du matin, j'arrive au collège, mes cours finissent à trois heures trente de l'après-midi, au printemps, les fleurs poussent et la température augmente peu à peu, en été, c'est bien parce qu'il fait chaud et on peut aller à la plage tous les jours, en hiver, il fait très, très mauvais, je préfère l'été, moi, je ne comprends pas, qu'est-ce que vous voulez dire,

oui, je voudrais être riche un jour, c'est-à-dire, je veux trouver un emploi bien payé pour pouvoir m'acheter ce que je veux plus tard ...'

And on it went into the early hours.

'Jason, you look terrible again!' His mother looked him up and down at the breakfast table. 'What have you been doing?' she asked, alarmed.

'Nothing, Mum. Please don't fret.'

He could hear her voice in his head, echoing in English then bouncing back in French as if he had an in-built internal interpreter. Was it going to be like this for the rest of the day? Would it wear off by tonight so he could get a good night's sleep? He hoped so, because at school the French lesson was first thing in the morning, then English after that. He certainly didn't want French extending into his English lesson. That would be unbearable.

As Madame Fantuffe had warned them yesterday, there would be a preliminary examination, first oral and then written, and this would go some way towards the proper exams next week. If the power he invoked last night could stay with him for a couple of hours he would be safe. He didn't care what happened after that. English he was fine with, but this French had to be knuckled down once and for all.

Each pupil was given a task, a simple phrase in English, which they then had to translate into French verbally as best they could. Jason was the first candidate. He stood at the front of the class, with Madame Fantuffe almost smirking to herself as she sat at her desk, as if somehow it would be amusing to watch this little boy squirm, and crumble before everyone's eyes.

'Today is Thursday,' she said.

'Aujourd'hui, on est jeudi,' he replied without hesitation and with perfect pronunciation.

Madame marked him in her book and proceeded to the next phrase.

'From Monday to Friday.'

'Du lundi au vendredi.'

She marked him again and continued, staying with days of the week.

'Not this Saturday but the one after next.'

'Pas ce samedi, mais celui d'après,' again delivered perfectly.

This time she started nodding. All the class looked on in disbelief.

'Last Wednesday Marie went to the library with her friends.'

'Mercredi dernier, Marie est allée au bibliothèque avec ses amis,' again perfect.

'I have to do my homework this weekend because I have a test next Friday.'

'Je dois faire mes devoirs ce week-end, car j'aurai un test vendredi prochain.'

As if to trick him, she switched tactics, changing the theme to time.

‘It’s half past one.’

‘Il est une heure et demie,’ he replied, unfazed.

‘It’s quarter to ten.’

‘Il est dix heures moins le quart.’

‘I have an appointment at 9 o’clock.’

‘J’ai un rendez-vous à neuf heures.’

‘It was hard, but I finished the marathon in four hours, sixteen minutes, forty-five seconds.’

‘C’était dur, mais j’ai terminé le marathon en quatre heures, seize minutes, quarante-cinq secondes.’

There were gasps from the other boys and whispering. Madame put her little book down and looked at Jason suspiciously, then simply said, ‘Asseyez-vous.’

‘Merci,’ he replied, grinning all the way back to his seat.

He could relax now and watch the rest of the class make a hash of their attempts at speaking French. None of them came anywhere close. He was out on top of the class, for a change. Now they had to do a written test, simply translating into French long sentences, obviously designed to catch them off guard with all those pesky accents. The test should have lasted 40 minutes. Jason did it in 30. Madame Fantuffe noticed and glanced at him suspiciously again. What was the boy on? What had he done over the Christmas holidays that could have possibly made him bilingual? He even had to ask himself the same question. If he went to France would he be able to converse with the natives? Would he be able to pass himself off as being one of their own? He knew certain people had a knack. They could pick up any language and soon speak it as if it was a second tongue, like this guy he saw in Athens when he was a kid on holiday with his parents, the only time he’s ever been abroad. This guy was like an old hippie with long hair and a matching beard. He was an American who lived in the city. He was seated at the bar talking to his American friends. They were asking him questions like where were the best places to go. He would turn to the guy behind the bar and ask him in Greek, then translate it back into English, and he kept doing this, switching back and forth, English-Greek, Greek-English. How does someone get that proficient, Jason wondered. Just watching this guy do it was amazing. Would he ever be that good?

Again, as in the maths test, everyone was ordered to put down their pens, whether they had finished or not. Time was up. Jason was asked to collect the papers since he was at the back of the class. He picked them up, making sure his paper stayed on top of the pile, and deposited them on Madame’s desk. Their eyes met briefly. He started to smile at her. But

she didn't reciprocate. Would she congratulate him after marking his paper telling him how well he had done? He didn't expect adulation, but it would be nice to be rewarded or at least give him some recognition for his good effort. But being the cold, hard woman she was, that was perhaps asking too much.

She dismissed the class nonchalantly. The boys had a good five minutes before heading to the next class. Jason and his friends went outside for some fresh air, to get away from that stifling woman.

'How did you do that?' they were asking him.

'Plenty of practice,' he lied.

Of course, none of them believed him, although they had to admit he was kind of absent all over Christmas and had stopped hanging out with them. Normally he would at least call, or drop by, even if it was only for a few minutes. Did he think he was now too good for them? Is that what happens when you start improving or try to take control of your life? Or were they just jealous? And as soon as he thought that, who should appear but Cavanagh, deliberately bumping into Jason, almost sending the little boy flying. He gave him a quick look over his shoulder as if Jason was nothing, and proceeded back into school. The others gave him a look as well, as if to say 'Be careful, he means business.' But Jason refused to be provoked. Besides, he never engaged in fights. That was for bullies with no brains who thought they were clever but were only being stupid. Bullies tend to thrive on power. It boosts their ego, making them feel superior to others. It compensates for feelings of inferiority, like so many beach boys flexing their muscles trying to impress the girls.

Jason decided something would have to be done about Cavanagh. If his attitude towards him didn't change, then Jason was going to teach the brute a lesson, one he might regret. It would be far easier to just remove him from the school, perhaps get him expelled, sent to another school where he could pester other boys. But he would have to do something soon. He didn't want his plans upset by a boy who gained gratification through domination, and Jason was certainly not going to be subjected to any of that nonsense.

After lunch, Jason received a message that Old Rennie wanted to see him again. He guessed it was for the same reason as last time. Madame Fantuffe had probably marked his paper by now and word had reached his art teacher how well he did in the test, or at least that was the assumption. He wouldn't really know until he heard the old man.

'Come in, my lad,' he beckoned Jason in. 'Well, sit yourself down.' He motioned to the chair in the centre of the room.

For some reason Mr Rennie was being quite affable. He watched him go over to his desk and sit himself down in his big leather armchair.

‘Madame Fantuffe,’ he started, ‘seems to think you’ve been cheating in one of your tests. Now of course you and I know that simply isn’t true. I fear I should warn you, your success so far is causing some concern. The other teachers are beginning to get suspicious. No boy has suddenly excelled in his subjects so quickly as you have demonstrated over the past few weeks. They are very sceptical of boys who start shining as you have. I would suggest, if I may be so bold, to loosen up, let the pace slacken somewhat. At the rate you’re going you are liable to get in a heap of trouble. It’s all very well to exceed in one subject if you show promise early, but showing success in subjects you were at the start poor in will only arouse suspicions as well. Of course, I understand what you’re trying to do. I know you’re thinking of your placement exams at the end of next week. You want to be placed on the top stream come September, don’t you?’

The boy nodded.

‘Very well. I will personally recommend you, but I suggest you first back off otherwise you will dig yourself a very deep hole in which you will find it very difficult to get out of. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Now, no more trickery on the other subjects. With your excelling in maths, French and geography, as well as your flair for art and English, that should already stand you in good stead for the rest of this year. If you maintain your current standards you can be assured of a placement in the top stream in the next academic year. Are we clear?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Now is there anything else?’

‘I have a slight problem with another boy, sir.’

‘Yes, so I’ve heard. What do you intend to do about it?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘If you resort to cursing, be very careful, for if the target is off, it may very well rebound on you.’

‘I thought of cursing, sir, but I’m afraid of using it for that reason.’

‘Good. And so you should be. You don’t want to end up a Black Brother. Let me ponder your predicament and I will see what I can do. I may even come up with a solution to the problem.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘One more thing before you go. I’ve put forward the suggestion for you to have your art included in this year’s school exhibition in the summer. It’s normally reserved for older boys, as you know, but Mr Wilkinson, our mayor, has seen your work and assured me he’s going to do his utmost to have it on display. It will probably be held in the banquetting suite at the Town Hall. He’s going to get back to me with the

full details once the Council has given its consent.'

'Thank you again, sir.'

'Now run along, and don't forget what I said.'

'I won't, sir.'

Despite what his mother had told him about Old Rennie, he was the only one who seemed to understand what he was going through. It was as if a mutual bond had developed between them that went beyond mentor and student, hopefully a trusting bond which would at least last till he finished schooling. Jason always felt better when he came away from their little chats. It was like having a second father really, someone he felt he could confide in about things which perhaps may not be at all appropriate to discuss with his own father.

Chapter Ten

The next morning, the Friday, Jason was eager to get to school. In the afternoon it was a full session with Old Rennie. He was looking forward to it and wondered what the old man had in mind for their exercise. This would count towards their placement exam next week. He was not worried; he knew his competency level in art was now quite high, and he was certain in his own belief he would sail through the test.

In assembly, as if Jason didn't need reminding about his 'slight problem,' Cavanagh was asked to come to the stage. Apparently, during the Christmas break he was doing some fund-raising for a local charity. He somehow managed to raise over £500, a feat Jason believed could only have been achieved by the threat of physical violence. He was a big lad for a thirteen year old. Donators may have found him intimidating. When he took to the stage Jason couldn't help wondering how this thug (for he certainly looked like one) could also be a maths champion. The two images were incongruous and didn't make sense. Was he cheating? Or did he have a natural mathematical bent?

The head of the charity also took to the stage. She was a smartly dressed woman in her forties. She personally thanked him and gave him an award, a small bronze medal for his valiant efforts. Mr Martin started to clap, and everyone else followed suit. Soon the hall was alive with the sound of applause and Cavanagh lapped it up, standing there gleefully clutching his medal and waving it high in the air. Jason also clapped. But it was a half-clap really, mechanical, not animated like the others. Was he jealous? No, why should he be. Cavanagh was hardly a popular boy at school or a star pupil.

Just then Jason caught Charlie looking at him over his shoulder,

smiling. He knew this ovation would grate on little Jason, like rubbing salt into the wound. But Jason refused to acknowledge it and remained unfazed. He would deal with Cavanagh later only if—and it was a big if—he provoked him once again. All he wanted to do at present was get to this afternoon with Old Rennie. That should be fun, he thought, then he could forget all about Cavanagh.

But it wasn't to be.

At lunchtime when they had finished their school dinner, Jason and his friends went out into the playground and were chatting amongst themselves, the usual trivial nonsense. Jason got his marks back from Madame Fantuffe and found he was the top of the class, as he well expected. 'Zut alors!' he was joking with them when Cavanagh came up behind him and deliberately banged into him, hard enough to nearly send him flying. How pathetic, he thought, picking on a boy half his size. But Cavanagh scoffed at him and walked off. Wow, receiving a medal must have really boosted his ego. Now he thought he was something, a real somebody who should be taken notice of, and he made it very apparent to everyone, looking down at anybody he came across as he headed back inside. The stupid boy thought he was 'The Man.' And the man needed to come unstuck. He needed to be dealt a severe blow to his ego, something to shrivel his pride and make him feel worthless; only then would he come back down to the real world.

In art class, Jason kept pushing his problem to the back of his mind. They had been given a simple task, a still portrait of a vase and some flowers, but this time they were to use only charcoal. This presented no significant problem to Jason. In fact, he loved using charcoals; drawing a faint outline, then using his fingers to smudge it into the paper to give the picture some shading, and was busily doing just that when Old Rennie came up behind him and patted him on his head. He obviously approved of his work and left him to his own devices. But as Jason scribbled and scrubbed he found his hand wandering off, embellishing the vase with patterns that weren't there, big scrawling lines, small curves suggesting leaves, and then on to the table surface now being covered with an imaginary cloth; swirls, spirals, spindles, spidery traces. He found he was seized with a mania he never experienced before. Then all this rage started pouring out of him. He could feel it in every limb and it felt like it was coming from deep down within him, being channelled through his hand, which was quickly out of control, going over the entire page with a frenzy until nearly every blank space was covered, completely ruining his picture. It was now ugly and defiled.

Mr Rennie, who must have heard the boy working away feverishly, wondered what the hell was going on. Intrigued, he came up behind

Jason, took one look at the mess the boy was making of his picture, and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him out of the class.

Outside in the corridor Mr Rennie had him fairly pinned up against the wall, his eyes burning into his.

‘What’s all that about?’ he shouted.

‘Nothing, sir,’ he whimpered.

‘Don’t give me that! You have just ruined a perfectly good picture. Now, tell me what’s going on?’

‘Nothing, sir,’ he repeated.

The teacher let him go, realising he was dealing with an eleven year old; the best way to approach a boy of that age was to treat him like one.

He smoothed the boy’s crumpled hair, gave him a big friendly smile.

‘I think I know what’s going on,’ he told him soothingly. ‘It’s your little problem again, isn’t it?’

The boy just nodded.

‘I told you before, you have to be very careful with your brand of magic for it works on repression. If you keep pushing this anger down it is bound to burst out occasionally. That’s why you need to strengthen your will.’

‘Yes, sir,’ he replied sheepishly.

‘I suggest the best thing to do is to mull it over this weekend. That boy is nothing but a thug. God knows how he accomplished what he did, but obviously it has affected you, and you are better than him, cleverer than him. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir,’ he replied sheepishly, again.

‘Good. Now I suggest you use your brains to defeat him, because you don’t want to reduce yourself to his level, do you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Perhaps you could affect his exams next week. That will bring him down to earth, won’t it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ he beamed.

‘Good. Now go back, start a new picture. You’ve got an hour left.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The boy bounced back into the classroom as if the whole world had been taken off his shoulders. In less than hour he was able to re-create his masterpiece, and sat back and smiled.

He decided the weekend would be the perfect opportunity to deal with his little problem. Being at home, and not at school, will make him forget all about Cavanagh which will help to make the magic work.

In the evening he was toying around with ideas. He knew the teacher was right. Yes, he did have to strengthen his will. After all, he didn’t want an accident like that happening again and ruining his best work. It

was a temper tantrum, something he always suffered from ever since he was a little child. He would lose his temper if he didn't get what he wanted and his mother, exasperated, would lock him in the toilet until he calmed down. It was evident he had a lot of anger in him, as most boys do at that age, he supposed. And anger, a fine tool for use in cursing because it is a raw form of energy, would not do in this instance. He was going to have to be clever, do something sophisticated, rather than resort to violence. Mr Rennie's suggestion of affecting Cavanagh's exam was a good idea. Based on that premise, he started formulating something in his mind, and came up with: 'I DESIRE CAVANAGH TO FAIL.' It was simple but effective. That should do, he told himself, and turned it into a sigil, charged it, dropped it and forgot it, tearing the paper up into tiny pieces and throwing it in the bin as if he had just disposed of his little problem, and went downstairs for tea.

'You looked pleased with yourself,' his mother remarked as she handed him his plate.

His father, busy reading the evening paper at the table, let the paper drop for a second or two, had a good look at his son, smiled, then went back to what he was reading.

Jason figured he probably thought he had girls on his mind. Soon he would have. In a couple of months time he was going to be twelve. Isn't that when young boys start showing an interest in girls? And at the start of the new academic year they would be studying biology. That's all to do with sex, isn't it, what ever that was. He didn't know, well at least not much, apart from what he heard the older boys talking about. His dad would no doubt explain to him one day, give him a talk on 'the birds and the bees,' as it was called. He wasn't planning on getting any girls into trouble—not just yet.

During the course of the weekend Jason set himself some exercises, far more interesting than girls. He wanted to make his will impregnable so there would be no more outbursts. If he did have real anger in him then he was going to let it out, but always under will.

He went back to basic exercises, simply visualising a candle flame, then transferring it to his mind's eye, seeing it get bigger, then smaller, and then snuffing it out.

At one point he had an insane notion he could actually snuff out a candle by will alone. Apparently, Spare could do it, so why couldn't he?

He lit a candle and stood it on his bedside table. He took up a comfortable seating position so his body would not affect his mind, and stared at the flame, imaging it going out.

'Concentrate, come on, concentrate,' he told himself. But it wouldn't go out. He wasn't even sure how to snuff out a candle without blowing

on it. Should he imagine a strong gust of wind? Or how about rain? Then it suddenly hit him, 'Of course!' That's all he had to do was imagine water falling on the flame. Water beats fire hands down, so this had to work. He conjured up the element of water, imagining vast quantities falling on the flame, torrents, tidal waves, tsunamis, gushing upon the poor weak thing, and within seconds no more flame.

'Fantastic,' he jumped with joy. 'Now your next mission, should you decide to accept it,' he joked, 'how about doing it the other way round.'

If he could use water to put out fire then he should be able to use fire to put out water, or at least force it to evaporate through heat.

He fetched a small glass bowl from the bathroom, poured a tiny amount of water in it, then set it above a makeshift tripod, just high enough to imagine a Bunsen burner underneath, like the ones used in chemistry lessons.

He figured this would be more difficult. He was going to have to visualise a flame, intensely hot, not just a candle flame, but more like an acetylene torch, heating up the bowl and causing the water to boil, then evaporate. He imagined the flame being white hot, blue round the edges, the bowl so hot that it would shatter. Within a few minutes he began to see steam coming off the water and thought he heard bubbling like the sound of a cauldron, or a hissing sound as if he was actually in a lab where an experiment was being carried out with all these tubes and pipes passing liquids back and forth. He could see the steam rising, the water bubbling away, and the level of water slowly decreasing until there was virtually nothing left. He stopped, got up and checked the bowl. What little water remained was purely vapour, a thin layer covering the bottom. Yet what amazed him more than anything else was when he went to pick up the bowl it was quite warm, not boiling, but definitely hotter than room temperature.

'Wow,' he exclaimed. 'If I can do that, I can do anything,' he told himself.

He then started looking round for other ideas. He found an old ping-pong ball in the streets once and brought it home. He didn't know why. Thought it may come in handy one day. He fetched it and cleared a space on the top of his chest of drawers and placed it in the centre, away from any other objects. He stood two feet away and stared at it. Could he move it by will alone? But that seemed rather futile. And what had Old Rennie said about magic? Why use supernatural means when you can accomplish the same thing physically, as he demonstrated by turning on the light. Besides, that isn't really magic, is it? Moving objects by will, that had a special name, didn't it? Then he remembered it was called telekinesis, something psychics were supposed to be able to do. It all

seemed rather trivial and mundane. No, he wanted to do something better than that, real magic, not charlatanism.

But first, back to sorting out his will. It was no good having power if you couldn't wield it, handle it properly or control it. He had seen that in a film about a girl who had such powers and after destroying her enemies, she got burnt up by them herself. That was because the powers took over. She was not using them; they were using her, and she became literally power crazy. If only she had learned to exercise her will.

He was doing that just now, controlling himself physically, standing on one leg without moving for ten minutes, next slowing down his breathing till it was barely perceptible, then seeing if he could hold his hand out straight without it wavering for as long as possible. Simple things but he had to get the basics sorted out first. Now to the next bit; the mental level. Holding one thought (and one thought only) in his head without thinking about anything else. This proved more difficult. It was all very well holding an object mentally, like the flame of a candle, a cross, a square, a three dimensional object like a sphere, but when it comes to a thought, something that is abstract, there is little for the visual sense to hang on to. We are visual people, he concluded, as the artist that he was. Most of what we understand about the world comes through our vision. We can imagine what a car is because we see one every day, or a house, or a street, etc. But take an abstract concept like beauty. We all think we know what it is. Yet it has associations, and these are other thoughts connected with the word. Holding on to a thought like 'beauty' or 'love' or 'freedom' or 'health' or 'wealth,' etc., they are abstract nouns, and the mind has a tendency to turn them into pictures. We can imagine wealth. It is easy. We imagine expensive cars, big houses, luxury yachts, tons of money in the bank. These are images associated with being rich. But what do we mean by wealth? It was such an abstract term even Jason wasn't sure. He certainly wasn't wealthy. His pocket-money hardly lasted the weekend. But he imagined what it was like to be wealthy, seeing money pour into his non-existent bank account, being able to afford whatever he wanted, not even having to worry about the things like his dad did, paying bills, paying for a new school uniform, petrol for the car, that kind of thing. Besides, what need he of wealth at his age. He further concluded it was very hard to hold in mind such an abstract term and dismissed it, making his mind go blank instead. To think of nothing is even harder. He wanted to punish himself every time a random thought popped into his head. He would curse and chastise himself, then the next thing he knew he was off, his mind full of thoughts and had completely forgotten he wasn't even supposed to be thinking!

He jumped up and screamed, 'Aargh!' and went to bed.

Chapter Eleven

Now was the real test: sitting exams. The week had gone by so quick Jason barely managed to fit everything in. He crammed in as much as possible, swatting up on not just the subjects he was competent in, but also the ones where he was failing. It was the latter he feared the most as he knew his science and history would let him down badly. Although the marks were going to be averaged out across all subjects, he would have preferred to get higher marks on these in particular and thus boost the averages over all. He was going to have to excel in his good subjects; these would take up the slack on the poor ones. It was a pity he couldn't use some magic to help, but as Old Rennie had said, he needed to slow down a bit. Using magic to get better grades on his poor subjects would have led to overload, and probably fried his brains.

As for Cavanagh, he hadn't been seen all week. Jason had forgotten all about him until Charlie reminded him, then it all came flooding back, tinged with a certain amount of animosity. He figured a whole weekend without thinking about the lout was probably long enough for the magic to work and do its trick. Perhaps he overdid it and the poor boy had an accident, or he really had been expelled from school.

Jason was later to learn Cavanagh was indeed coming to school but for some reason was keeping a low-profile. It seemed he got caught with some misdemeanour (nobody knew what although rumours were flying round) and had to work all through the day, attending extra lessons at lunch time, even attending detention after school. That's why nobody had seen him.

Jason wondered if this was a tangential effect. It could have had something to do with his little ritual over the weekend. Best forget about it, he thought, and concentrate on the business in hand. He had one full day of exams, some taking thirty minutes, others a full hour.

Art had been easy. No problem. Straight A's he reckoned. Same with geography, a cinch as if was a walking atlas. French, he surpassed himself, both in written and oral. Maths, a feat of ingenuity. English, superb. Science, not so. He was going to have to learn the periodic tables, the elements, acidity, basic chemistry, etc. History—where should he start? He got king Edward the Seventh mixed up with the Eighth. For the Great Fire of London he put 1066 when it should have been 1666 (1066 was the Battle of Hastings), the gunpowder plot he couldn't remember the year, or when the Magna Carta was signed. Was it King John who burnt the cakes or Alfred? And when did the last of the Romans leave Britain? Basically, he made a right mess of it. This was not good. He was now beginning to think his little trick had rebounded on him, missing its mark entirely.

All he could do now was pray and hope for the best. At the weekend he would have to do some revising; no more magic, not yet. He needed to unwind, get his head round his tragic failure and take it from there.

The following week Jason received some surprising news. All the papers were marked over the weekend, and he did far better than he thought, amassing a total of 87 points, enough to get into the G-Stream, but based on potential effort rather than actual. Most kids had to get at least 90 points to guarantee a place in the top class. And Old Rennie had helped by recommending he be given a chance. No other pupil in his class was going on to the G-Stream, and apparently there were far fewer candidates from the whole year, only twelve, and Jason was one of them. His parents will be pleased, proud of their son who had been working so hard. Okay, he may have cheated by using a little magic, but he didn't think of it as cheating. It was just a boost to get his brain cells working, bringing out his natural talent which was latent anyway.

But poor old Cavanagh. What happened to him? Jason found out afterwards the boy had really messed up, doing far worse in history and science than Jason! Not only did he get his dates confused in history (which would have been more advanced considering he was two years above him), but also failed to answer half of them. His science was appalling, apparently; his geography hopeless; his art atrocious; his English diabolical; his French laughable; his maths, which should have saved him, didn't. He claimed he suffered from a brain-freeze halfway into the exam, and just couldn't think. Because his marks were so bad, he was demoted from F to D. He would stay a D until his marks picked up.

'That will teach him a lesson,' Jason joked to himself. He just hoped there would be no comebacks or reprisals. But why should there be. Little Jason had done nothing, at least nothing Cavanagh would've been aware of, and having suffered such a public defeat and utter humiliation,

the stupid boy perhaps would now leave him alone.

Jason received congratulations from most of his classmates, yet not all of them as some were envious and didn't see how he managed to achieve such high marks, especially in subjects he was known to be poor at, or why he should be promoted. He accepted there would be envy, if not outright suspicion. Old Rennie had warned him. And it was probably a good thing he didn't try to boost his competence in all subjects at once. After all, we cannot always be good at everything. It reminded him of the saying 'Jack of all trades; Master of none.' This was equally applicable at school. He would sort those subjects out during the summer holidays, work on them until he got to grips with them, and then when he came back he would be in the top class anyway where notable achievements wouldn't be so noticeable.

He couldn't wait to get home to tell his parents. He cycled quickly, and was by his front door in less than four minutes, still clutching his results. Inside he was calling out 'Mum' repeatedly until she appeared.

'What is it, dear?'

'Look,' he said, proudly handing over his achievement.

'You've done it,' she gasped. 'Oh, your dad will be pleased. Do you want to tell him, or should I?'

'You can, Mum, because I want to ask him a favour.'

'And what's that?'

'Do you remember you asked me what I wanted for my seventh birthday, and I said I wanted a dog?'

'That's right. And we both told you that you were too young, and we will get you one when you're older.'

'Well I'm older now.'

'I see. And because you've done well at school you think you deserve one. Is that it?'

'Dad did promise.'

'I know he did, dear. I will speak to him after dinner. Having a dog is a big responsibility. You have to take it to the vet, feed it, take it for a walk every day.'

'Oh, I don't want a dog. I've changed my mind. I want a cat.'

'Oh, I see. Any particular reason?'

'Because you don't have to take it for a walk.'

'Now you're being facetious. Let me speak to your father. I'm sure he won't mind a cat in the house.'

'Thanks, Mum.'

The delighted boy trundled upstairs like it was his birthday all over again. If his parents did get him a cat he was hoping it would be male and black all over, for there was something about a black cat that made

everyone superstitious. Did they really cause bad luck if one walked out in front of you? And because of their association with witches and witchcraft, it would be a more potent symbol. He would think of it as his familiar. He was hoping for a kitten, then he could train it, and later get it to pose for him, just like Spare did with his cats. And if it was a male, what would he call it? There was only one name he could think of which would be appropriate.

As promised, his mother talked to his father in private before he came downstairs for tea. He could hear his response coming from the kitchen, saying things like ‘A cat! What does he want a bloody cat for? Cat’s are for little girls. Most boys want a dog,’ and so it went on. It sounded like his dreams were going to be scuppered. He daren’t go down just yet, not until his mother had won him over. She had a way of talking to his dad, and if she put her mind to it, she could twist him round her little finger. Perhaps he was in a bad mood or something.

He sat on the top of the stairs waiting, wondering how long it would take her, catching only snippets, like ‘We’ll see,’ and ‘Let me think about it.’

He was only asking for a cat. What was his problem?

Then he heard his dad call up for him to come down. Fretful, he made his way gingerly down the stairs, pretending he hadn’t heard a thing.

‘Now, what’s all this about you wanting a cat?’ he asked him gruffly.

‘Oh please, Dad,’ he begged him. ‘I’ll look after it, I promise.’

‘I’m sure you will, son,’ he said, gripping the boy’s shoulders firmly, looking him in the eye. ‘But they don’t do much, do they? They just eat and mess everywhere. I mean, Aunt Beryl’s house stinks of cat pee. Do you remember the last time we went round there? A god-awful smell.’

‘That’s only because she has so many,’ his mother chipped in. ‘I doubt if she even lets them out.’

‘But I’ll train it to use the litter tray, or take it outside where it can do its doodahs.’ Jason was wondering what it was his dad had against cats.

‘Why don’t we get you a dog instead? They’re much better. You can get it to guard the house.’

‘But I don’t want a dog.’

‘Jesus,’ his father swore, and looked to his wife who was shaking her head, then back to his son. ‘Okay, we’ll get you a cat.’

‘You promise?’

‘I promise. But you’ll have to look after it, mind. I don’t want it doing anything round the house in some dark corner. And you’ll have to use some of your pocket money to pay for its food.’

‘Oh thanks, Dad. You’re the best. Just one more thing.’

‘What, son?’

‘Can I have a black one, preferably a male?’

His dad looked at him with a quizzical expression, then said calmly: ‘We’ll see what we can do.’

It soon transpired his parents were planning on getting him a pet anyway. His mother was told after Jason was born she would never be able to conceive again, so it looked like he was going to be a lonely child, no siblings. Not that having a pet was any substitute for being without a brother or sister to play with, but a pet like a dog or a cat could be a very good companion for him when his parents went on holiday, should their precious son choose to remain behind when he was older.

But what was his dad’s real objection to him having a cat anyway? Surely he didn’t think his son was one of them funny boys all because he wanted a cat and not a dog!

Three days later he got what he wanted; his own cat. It was black and male, just as he wished, and about four months old. He had already been neutered so there wouldn’t be any problems there, and supposedly came from a good home, and not a rescue centre. But the first thing he noticed was the strange eye colour. When looked at closely they were a bright electric blue. From a distance the eye colour seemed to change, not as bright but more of a dull blue verging on green. Also, apparently, as his parents had been told, the colour will become more defined as it grew older, something to do with its Siamese genetics, the blue eye colour resulting from a mutation. Although the pupils were black, they were said to glow a deep red in the dark. That should be interesting, he thought, and in a couple of month’s time it would be his birthday; a set of coloured pastels was on his wish list. With those he would be inspired to do endless sketches of his cat, trying to get the exact same eye colouring.

‘Well, what do you think?’ his mother asked him.

‘He’s beautiful,’ he replied, holding the still quite small creature, who would one day grow into a big thing. His eyes were wandering all over the hallway as if trying to reconnoitre where it was. ‘Is this my new home?’ he seemed to be asking.

‘Pleased, son?’ his dad asked him.

‘Very.’

‘Now, you will take care of him, won’t you, Jason?’

‘Of course, Mum.’

‘What are you going to call him, son?’ his dad asked, trying to not get all sentimental over such a small helpless thing.

‘How about Austin?’ he replied with a smile.

His parents smiled too, although ignorant as to the choice of name.

But he didn’t care, he was happy with his new pet. Didn’t know that much about them. His only previous exposure to cats was Aunt Beryl’s.

One of them was a moggie, a big fat thing, always well-fed as it was her favourite. She enjoyed treating it to plenty of tuna steaks. It never got any exercise so it took on loads of weight, and was probably the one doing all the peeing round the house when she wasn't looking. But his cat wasn't going to do that.

He would have to keep Austin indoors for a few days, they told him, at least till he got used to being here. He was still too young to go out anyway, but when old enough Jason decided he was going to let him out of his bedroom window. There was a tall ash tree adjacent to the back of the house, right next to his window. His cat would be able to go out on the ledge, walk along it, and then climb down the tree and climb back in when he wanted to. He would leave the window open for his cat, even at night in the winter, so he could come and go as he pleased.

He fed Austin with some food his parents had already bought. They reminded him some of his pocket money would have to go towards the cat's expenses. When he turned thirteen he was planning on getting a paper-round anyway. That would help to offset the cost as he knew his cat would get bigger and probably need to eat more. But as a kitten, his appetite wasn't so big, just a third of a tin would keep it satisfied till its next meal. His mother put down a litter tray for little Austin and some fresh litter and gave her son a stroke under his chin.

'Happy now?' she asked him.

Jason nodded as he watched the little critter use the tray for the first time and wondered how they always instinctively know what to do afterwards.

Cats have it easy, he decided. They don't have to go to school, learn stupid subjects, work hard, sit exams, do homework, or get a job later in life. They don't have to pay bills, rents, mortgages, or go to work, or even have to learn how to drive a car like he was going to do one day. They get free food, free accommodation, and treat the house like a hotel. They snuggle up by the electric fire on cold winter nights without having to worry about things like who's paying for it, and sleep on average about sixteen hours a day. Wow, it must be really hard work being a cat. Yep, they've got it easy.

Then Jason caught himself saying, 'I wish I was a cat,' as he sat there watching the kitten curl up and fall asleep. What would it actually be like to be one? He had an idea and asked his mother to keep an eye on Austin, and ran upstairs to his bedroom. He quickly wrote down his desire, 'I DESIRE TO BE A CAT,' turned it into a sigil, charged it, and forgot it. He wasn't expecting anything to happen straight away, yet it would be interesting to see what kind of result he would get. He purposely stayed in his room for over an hour and did some studying

(reading up on major events in American history, like the Boston Tea Party, Declaration of Independence, etc.) anything to take his mind off his desire.

He then heard a shout from his mother telling him tea was ready. He called out to say he would be right down, and couldn't even remember coming up to his room, or why, until he caught sight of Austin still asleep in the lounge on his mother's favourite armchair. Jason half-expected to be bombarded by images of cats, not just moggies, but real cats like tigers, lions, leopards, cheetahs, cougars, but nothing came, no images sprung to mind at all.

He sat at the dinner table perplexed, engaging in petty talk with his parents. They were asking him what he was going to be doing over the weekend. They would be out all day so he was going to have to look after Austin, making sure he was fed, and didn't let him out in case he tried to escape. They suggested the kitten should sleep in his room from now on at night and he was the only one going to feed it so it would rely on him and not pester his parents for food. They made that perfectly clear from the outset. Not that he minded. He loved the idea of little Austin cuddling up next to him, falling asleep when he did, and waking up to him in the morning seeing his big bright blue eyes staring back at him. But none of this talk of cats elicited a response from his unconscious. Was it dead? Had he done something wrong in the ritual? Had he failed? It would be the first time, for he was quite sure he had Spare's system down to a T. He knew how it worked, and never failed in any of his rites, even getting Cavanagh demoted. That proved it worked.

And as they sat watching TV, a commercial came on advertising a well known brand of petrol using a real live tiger. It produced nothing in him, not even a flicker of emotion. Again he was expecting something to happen, a trigger effect that would get the ball rolling. Nothing. He looked around, looked over his shoulder as if some great big cat was going to jump up from behind the sofa. Still nothing. Seeing a lion in another commercial advertising a chocolate bar, and the logo of it roaring, still produced no response. He thought the floodgates were bound to open, and there would be images pouring through any second, yet nothing, not even a trickle.

He went to bed that night bemused. Before long he was nodding off to sleep, his kitten beside him in a little box he made for it lined with an old towel. Austin's faint but audible purring was enough to send anybody to sleep, so relaxing he soon forgot about everything and drifted off and found himself dreaming dreams the likes of which he had never dreamt before, not disturbing ones, but dark and deep as if descending into incredible depths, utterly primal. He could hear the roar of some beast far

off as if his hearing was incredibly acute. It was getting closer and closer, coming directly towards him. He then realised it was chasing him and he was running, on all fours, across swathes of grass, his long tail bounding behind him, the pads on his paws making a dull thudding sound as they hit hard earth, then running up a tree, his claws digging into the bark for better traction, his pointed ears twitching at the slightest sound, and his big round eyes staring out from the top of the tree. Wow, I'm a cat, he thought. But as soon as he thought that he immediately woke up to find himself lying on top of his bed and profusely sweating as if he had been running. Even the end of his fingers felt like they had been scratching at something. They were sore. In the dark he could imagine them bleeding as if he had been trying to climb a vertical surface. He laughed at the idea and got back under the sheets.

Of course, he wasn't really a cat. What he meant to say was, 'I've taken on the atavism of a cat,' acquiring its powers but not transforming into one, well at least not physically, perhaps only in the dream-state. He dipped into his unconscious; it was his unconscious which transformed him into a cat. Now he knew what it was like to be one. His wish had been granted.

When Jason woke up in the morning, slightly later than usual, he was horrified when he opened his eyes. His little kitten was there in its little box staring at him with big innocent eyes. It wasn't the kitten that horrified him, it was what he saw behind Austin; the bedroom wall had curious marks on it. They could only be described as scratch marks, the sort made by claws of a cat trying to climb a wall, and too big, too deep, and too wide to be made by little Austin.

He checked his fingernails. They were dirty and appeared to have tiny pieces of wallpaper stuck under them, between the nail and skin, the paper matching the same colour as the one on his walls.

'Wow,' he could only remark, and, 'Heavy,' as if it was beyond his comprehension.

Then he must have actually tried to climb the wall in his sleep, when he was being chased by that beast. In that way his desire had been transferred to the physical plane. He may not have sprouted fur or a tail, but in every other respect he was a cat.

He quickly leapt out of bed and moved his small bookcase over to the wall to hide the incriminating evidence. If his father found out he was climbing bedroom walls and damaging his precious wallpaper, he would go mad, and probably throw him out of the house, along with the cat.

After a quick wash, and scrub up using a fingernail brush, he picked up little Austin. They both went downstairs for breakfast. Jason put down a small amount of food; the kitten gobbled it up in next to no time, and

was obviously starving. Whilst he was having his breakfast, Jason read a note from his mum, reminding him they had gone out for the day, lunch was in the fridge, and they would be back by tea time.

Charming, he thought. But he didn't mind. It meant he had a whole day to himself. He played with Austin, also making sure he was fully house-trained, and started drawing him in the afternoon. By the time his parents came home he had sketch after sketch of little Austin to show them, in a variety of poses; some asleep, some awake, some playing with a ball of wool, some of him using the new scratching post his parents had bought him. Jason used pens, colouring pencils and charcoals and found that he really had no preference as he was versatile in all three.

They could only nod their approval and had a feeling that little Austin was about to become the most sketched cat in Britain.

Chapter Twelve

For his twelfth birthday Jason got what he requested, a full set of pastels in a beautiful wooden box, highly polished, with brass hinges and latches. The label inside described them as ‘soft artists’ pastels’ and ‘Professional Quality.’ Did that mean he was now a professional artist?

There were seventy-two pastels in all, ranging from deep shades of red to subtle hues of blue, vivid greens to sombre violets; pinks, purples, browns, every shade he could think of, but only one white and one black. Never mind, he thought, they should last me awhile anyway.

They also gave him a massive pad of graded paper, finely textured so the pastels could work easily and abrade smoothly.

He hadn’t much experience of working with pastels. They were very different from pens, pencils, or even charcoals. It required a certain dexterity and expertise. You had to make the pastels work for you. Using paint and brush was easy. You load the brush with paint and it runs across the page until the paint runs out. With pastels you had to rub it against the paper, then, like charcoals, you smudge the mark you’ve just made to get the effect you want. And, like charcoals, they were very messy; you blew away the excess pastel to reveal what was actually on the page, and because it was almost impossible to get a hard defined edge, you were left with a subtle effect, an impression of the object.

Jason decided he was going to play with his new toy straight away. It was a Saturday, no school, and he had all day to get to grips with this fine art.

He took little Austin—now not so little—upstairs with him and made him lie on his bed. As Austin had eaten, he practically fell asleep almost immediately, soon as he got comfortable, and started purring away.

Jason, who by now knew the cat inside out, began to sketch, using first a black pastel for an outline, then three or four different shades of grey. It wasn't that easy. His first proper attempt was a disaster. Although you could make out the sketch was of a cat, it just didn't look right. The shades need to blend in, he thought. This required more craftsmanship than he realised. Of course, he wasn't going to be an overnight success; he knew he had to learn the craft.

He started again, this time using browns and greens and yellows, so he wouldn't waste the precious black. He saved the bright blue pastel for the eyes. The cat was fast asleep, but Jason knew the colour so well now, he could reproduce it from memory, with Austin's eyes closed.

He found the trick was to not hurry. No lightning quick sketch, and told himself to take his time. The third, fourth and fifth attempts showed significant improvement. But his sixth attempt was even better, for he was now kind of tired of sketching, but at the same time doing it almost second-hand, if not automatically, and like magic some of his best art was created when he was 'not there,' not Jason as a young boy, but an artist, an instrument for the art to flow through, and that really the artist should see himself as no different from the pen or brush he was using, merely as an extension of that tool, impersonal and remote. Only then could this creativity flow through, when the artist was absent.

Once he understood this principle, his art improved, becoming more expert. After lunch he resumed, this time getting Austin to sit still or play in front of a mirror. Jason set it up on the floor so Austin could have a look at his own reflection. He sketched the eyes, big this time, a bright electric blue, and rubbed in the pastels, then extended them with swirls of black, rubbing that in as well, with Austin's mirror reflection in a subtle shade of grey. The result was a thing of beauty, almost spectral, ghostly like an apparition or a wraith; there but not there at the same time.

Even Jason couldn't believe it. He considered it to be one of his finest pieces so far and decided he would show Old Rennie. He wouldn't mention it had taken him over a dozen attempts. He would just say he created it when he wasn't there, hoping the old man would get the joke.

Mr Rennie commended the work, patting the boy on the back and telling him how impressed he was. He had spoken to the mayor again who was very keen to put on an exhibition of Jason's work, along with the older boys. It was arranged for the whole of August, during the summer holiday. His art teacher requested some more of his work in all mediums, not only pastels, but watercolours, and pencil. There were three from the previous year he was happy with and would use in the exhibition. With this one that made four. He just needed another six to complete the collection, and suggested to Jason to spend some time

thinking about different subjects, perhaps a landscape painting, or even a self-portrait.

Jason loved the last suggestion. A self-portrait! He never thought of that before. Then he remembered Spare's portrait of himself staring resolutely at the viewer. Jason wondered if he could produce something similar, not identical for that would be copying, but something along the same lines. But how does an artist draw himself? He had seen many self-portraits before; one by Vermeer, one by Van Gogh, his head bandaged after cutting off his ear, and other artists. Did they all use mirrors like Spare? How was it done? He would have to experiment. He would need a big mirror, though, and an easel so he could do it standing up.

Having to draw himself would be a huge challenge. He never even looked at himself before, not with the eyes of an artist, thinking of such portraits as nothing more than a vanity exercise by artists with big egos. But for the earlier artists, he could understand as there were no cameras in those days. Painting a portrait of yourself was a way of establishing your fame, so people, who had only seen your works, now knew what you looked like. They could put a face to the name. Perhaps he could get his parents to take a photo of him? He had some already but they were old ones taken when he was much younger. He would ask them this evening, get his dad to take a picture on his old Canon camera and get the film developed over the weekend. Jason was not vain enough to think he was beautiful or handsome; in fact, he was thinking of doing a really gritty 'warts 'n' all' portrait so he wouldn't come across as some Adonis figure, or Narcissus in love with himself.

Old Rennie kindly offered to assist him and suggested this task should be applied to all the boys in his class. He would bring the big mirror down from the loft where it had been in storage for a number of years, give it a good clean and set it up on the northern wall of the classroom opposite the windows, clean them up too for maximum light, and try to get hold of as many easels as he could.

The next day in art class everything was set up. The boys walked into the room disturbed to find a huge mirror lined up against the wall, their desks moved to the back and five easels set up in the middle. 'What's this all about,' they were asking themselves, and put down their things with a look of outright dread. Surely they weren't going to be drawing themselves today, were they?

'Guess what is on the agenda for this lesson, lads?' Old Rennie roared with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. 'Little Jason here suggested we might get on and do some self-portraits. You have a whole afternoon to admire yourselves,' he cackled.

They looked at Jason and cursed. He shrugged it off and got to work.

He spent the previous evening looking at photos of himself. Even though they were old, and he must have been between five and seven, he could still see it was him, the same blue-grey eyes, the hair slightly lighter than it was now, the nose almost aquiline. But what surprised him was the amount of baby fat he lost on his face. His cheeks used to be bloated, puffed up, making his face appear almost round, so round you couldn't even see his cheekbones. All that chubbiness had now gone. He noticed it in the mirror this morning when he was brushing his teeth. His cheekbones were now fully visible, the cheeks themselves drawn in, not so much emaciated, but thinner, and this helped to define the overall look of his face. The hair was also longer in those days. Now it was cropped short on the sides, longer on top, and layered at the back. He then realised he hadn't actually looked at himself in a long time; the artist has to look. He has to use his eyes, as Mr Rennie kept saying. He had to take in the information, process it in his brain and then reproduce the image.

It was Spare's symbolism of the hand and the eye, again.

Mr Rennie was trying to help the boys, for they had no idea how to draw themselves, and those who were taking it in turns first, as there were only so many easels available, were stumped.

He told them to look at themselves, but not just look, also survey what they were seeing, get everything in proportion, and notice those peculiarities which distinguished their faces from everybody else's.

He mentioned an old painter who was so lost in looking, sometimes whole days would go by; he was completely oblivious of the passage of time. He would spend all day out by the river fishing and when he caught one he didn't just see a fish, he saw a thing of beauty, its scales being coruscations of light, the sunlight reflecting on them as it lay inert in his lap, and he could see all the colours of the rainbow in its tiny scales, whereas an ordinary person just saw a fish.

Old Rennie called it *The Art of Seeing*. Perhaps that's what Spare was conveying in that picture of his, for the eyes were the first thing you noticed: he was a seer who saw.

It was all very well seeing, Jason thought, it was another matter, however, drawing what you saw. Where that old man saw beauty in a fish, others would see ugliness, so it was a matter of perception, or what Spare called *The Aesthetic*. He recommended you should transcend your aesthetic culture, and see beauty in everything, even in the filth and the squalor all around. He could turn the ugliest looking hag he used for his sitters into the most beautiful woman in the world. It was still the same woman, in essence, but he managed through his art to bring out her latent beauty. Wouldn't it have been easier, Jason got to thinking, to hire a beautiful model in the first place? But then Spare had no money; the hag

was all he could afford. In the same way, he painted portraits of his cats because they were abundant and available. In some of the photos Jason had seen of Spare and his cats, most of them looked almost vile and filthy as if they hadn't been looked after properly. But in his artworks they were transformed into beautiful creatures, lithe and alert, peaceful but proud, demonstrating Spare wasn't a realist; he used the power of his imagination to turn the most base of objects into a thing of worth, like an alchemist turning lead into gold.

'Now keep it real,' Old Rennie was instructing them, but really it was to Jason he was speaking. In other words, don't let your imagination run away, paint only what you see.

Despite being top of the class, even Jason was finding the task more difficult than it first appeared. For one thing, he had never painted or drawn whilst standing up. He always worked sitting down or lying on his bedroom floor. He found it more comfortable, best suited for automatic drawings. But doing it like this was outside of his comfort zone. He asked Old Rennie if it was okay to do it sitting down, and was allowed to use a chair and started again. Then it came to him that he did some of his best work sitting down, but not him as Jason, but him as Spare!

Suddenly he got into his stride. It was as if the machinery, which had been clogged up, was now unclogged and the wheels of industry started rolling. He could see himself more clearly now, capture his profile more accurately, and was able to do a lightning quick sketch. Then picking up a palette, mixing the watercolours, two or three paintbrushes in his left hand already loaded with paint, and also holding the palette, his right hand then got to work. In less than thirty minutes he finished it, another fine masterpiece. It was him in the painting, definitely him, not some idealised portrait, like an Apollo or some other god with finely honed features: this was Jason, the real Jason.

'Excellent, my lad,' his teacher announced. 'Excellent.' And got the other boys to stop what they were doing and take a look at his work.

The others, those who had been sitting quietly as there weren't enough easels to go round, also were requested to take a good look. They were now expected to do the same as Jason since they had been watching him all the time.

It was this self-portrait, Mr Rennie decided, which was going to be used in the exhibition and form the centre of the young boy's oeuvre. He was delighted with it and pinned it up on the wall so all the others could see and use it as a template.

The following Friday there was an announcement in the local paper. In August Summerby Secondary School will be holding an art exhibition at the Town Hall for the whole month. The mayor will be opening the

show, cutting the ribbon, etc., and some of its star pupils will be in attendance, on hand to talk about their work and answer questions. It listed the star pupils alphabetically with their age in brackets, starting with Jarvis (16) as he was the oldest, who would be finishing at the end of the month, then down to the youngest, so Jason was listed last with his age in brackets (12). It was the first time he had seen his name in print, but mortified his name came last. As he was the youngest and the only pupil of his age group, he thought he should have been listed first. Yet his dad didn't seem to mind. He was thrilled to bits seeing his son's name in the paper, and started to think this could lead to bigger things, even perhaps accepting his future lay in the art world rather than the world of finance.

Mr Jones cut out the item and inserted the clipping in his scrapbook, along with all the old photos he had taken of Jason since he was a little boy. There were photos of him playing football (he never engaged in sports now), another one where he was playing a violin (or rather learning how to play—he gave up after a couple of months, and hasn't touched one since), another one where he's sitting at the table surrounded by books on stamp collecting (his dad tried to get him interested in philately—he lost interest after the first month), another where he's making an Airfix model of a plane (the only one he's ever made), another where he was trying to teach him golf, and one next to that of him and Jason playing Crazy Golf (his interest in that lasted about as long as the game took), and so it went on. My, how he's changed, he thought to himself. But there were none of Jason with any girls. Well, he was still young, he supposed, and just prayed to God he didn't turn out to be one of them funny boys.

He closed the scrapbook, reminiscing about the day his son was born. Or rather, the night he came into the world. There was some discrepancy over the time. One doctor said it was just before midnight, the other said it was about a minute past midnight. So was he born on the 29th or the 30th? It had been a difficult birth for his wife—Jason just didn't want to put in an appearance (he was already well overdue)—the delivery being rather protracted. As he had no idea himself of the time, it was settled on the toss of a coin, and the 30th it was.

He tapped the cover of the scrapbook and put it away. In time it would become a time-capsule, something the boy could reflect on when he got older. As a treat he went out shopping the next day, bought himself a decent camera and found an artist's easel in a second-hand shop, an item his son had been going on about for the past few months. At first he was reluctant to buy it. He dithered. It wasn't the price (it was very cheap), he was just unsure if he should. What he didn't want to do

was to encourage his son further in that direction, having already given him crayons, pencils, pens, brushes, etc., but had second thoughts. Maybe this could be a lucrative career for him. He was hearing, as well as reading, all about these new artists coming along, the 'British Prime Movers' the papers were calling them, of young artists who were making an impression on the world with their own individualistic approach to art and earning thousands in the process. Perhaps one day Jason would need an accountant, someone to handle all his finances, pay his bills, make deposits at the bank, cashing cheques, arranging for the payment of commissions, that sort of thing. His head was spinning with possibilities, seeing himself managing the young boy's estate, as he gladly took the easel to the counter and paid for it in cash.

Jason was delighted with his gift, even if it was only second-hand. But it was well-made and sturdy, and that's what mattered. He set up his easel in his bedroom and asked his dad to take some pictures with his new camera. He posed as an artist standing before his easel with brushes in one hand and a palette in the other. What he was trying to do, of course, was to re-create a photo of Spare doing the exact same pose in his studio surrounded by his cats.

His dad must have taken about twenty photos, from various angles, when he had to stop and ask his son what he was doing. Jason explained that his art teacher was looking for a good self-portrait to use in the exhibition. (Well that's what he told his dad anyway; if he was to explain to him he was trying to look like Spare, he would then have to go into more detail, something he didn't think he could ever do). In another few minutes his dad ran out of film. There were only twenty-four exposures on the roll, hopefully one of which would be usable. He urged his dad to get it developed this afternoon so he could start working on his portrait in the evening. If not happy with it, there was still the following day, a Sunday, and then it was back to school for the last week of term.

His dad didn't quite understand the urgency, yet did as he was asked and rushed into town to get the film developed, picking up another roll whilst he was there. He was no expert when it came to taking photos, but with his new camera it was a breeze. He just prayed his son would be happy with his effort.

The photos turned out remarkably well. As Jason insisted his dad only used natural light rather than a flash, using the sunlight coming through the windows, boosted by a bit of electric light, none of the photos were under- or over-exposed. His dad laid them all out on the table in the dining room for his son's inspection and watched him go through each one minutely, with his mother interfering along the way, telling him off for not smiling.

‘Mum! I’m not supposed to be smiling,’ he declaimed, whilst trying to decide which one came the closest to what he had in mind. ‘It’s supposed to be a serious picture of the artist at work.’

‘Oh, sorry, dear,’ and headed back to the kitchen to get the dinner ready.

Out of all of them there was only one matching the photo of Spare. It was the same pose, the only difference being Spare was much older and had more cats. Jason was probably about a third of the age with only one cat available, Austin. He would have to duplicate the critter several times over; he already had plenty of sketches of Austin anyway, and there were quite a few he could use. Yet it wasn’t until he clipped this one photo on his easel and started sketching in a rough outline that he realised he had the same piercing stare as Spare, something he must have developed since the end of last year. And he got this stare just right, exactly as it was in not only his photo but also the one of Spare so that the viewer would get the impression the artist was looking not at him but straight through him.

Jason concentrated on the eyes, using his precious pastels to embellish the look, then the rest of the face, followed by the hair, making it wild and wavy, just how he had seen in the pictures of a much younger Spare, with a little curl coming down over the forehead, with plenty of yellows and browns, rubbing in the pastels almost fervently to get a layered effect.

Not bad, he thought as he stood back to admire his work. All he needed now was to add a few light touches like a shabby coat, the sort of thing Spare would wear, the easel with the canvas away from the viewer so you couldn’t actually see what he was painting (presumably the same self-portrait he was now painting), and his cats. He selected about five sketches of Austin in various poses, and from different ages, choosing one when he was a kitten, another slightly older, one where he was asleep, one with an indifferent look on his face and was about to start drawing the fifth when something very strange happened.

His cat had been asleep most of the evening. Austin always fell asleep after eating, getting fed twice a day; once in the morning and once in the evening. He was curled up on Jason’s bed, his favourite place to sleep, and had been purring away when suddenly he woke up, sat up on his haunches and just stared at Jason. It was a stare he had never seen before, quite unnerving, nor was there any reason why the cat should stare at him in that way. He could understand it if there had been a loud bang and the poor thing was startled, or heard something above the human level like dogs were supposed to, or even had extra-sensory perception and could see things it was impossible for people to see. Yet it was also a perfect

pose, as if the little critter knew he was being drawn, and Jason decided it was this pose he was going to use which would form the centre piece of his portrait. He quickly sketched it, rough at first, fearing the cat would move or look away. Jason got it down immaculately, the exact same stare, then realised there were two creatures staring in the portrait: him and the cat!

For maximum impact he left the outer edges blank, creating a halo effect, with the actual sketch as a large oval shape, and himself as the central figure, his eyes just above the centre line, and the staring cat just below that.

The whole portrait had taken about four hours to complete and just in time for bed. Jason considered it to be one of the best pieces he had ever produced, and without using magic, only inspiration. His use of pastels was now fully under control. He knew how to get the effect he wanted from them, what colours to use, and the right amount of pressure to apply.

All he needed to do now was to sign it, and thought it was a pity he didn't have a name like Austin Osman Spare so he could put three initials, like AOS, rather than two. His parents had never given him a middle name, thinking Jason was sufficient, as if there could only be one Jason Jones, a common name if there ever was one! Then he thought of all the great writers some of whom had deliberately invented a middle name so they could sign their work with a middle initial to distinguish themselves from other writers with similar names. But then Jason realised he did have a middle name: Spaceman! So why not JSJ rather than plain ordinary JJ, or, even better J(S)J, but stylised so that the brackets looked like a big O but not quite closed at the top or bottom, leaving a tiny gap; the S sinuous like a snake, the two J's like two upright snakes, or even better, cobras, poised ready to strike. Yes, he was satisfied with the idea.

He toyed with it at first, practicing signing his initials in the desired manner, then when he thought he had perfected it he signed the portrait. As a bit of an in-joke he added a tiny paw print underneath by dabbing Austin's front paw in some black ink and pressing it on the paper, so it looked like there were really two self-portraits; one by him and one by the cat. Then went to bed pleased as punch.

Chapter Thirteen

‘Excellent, my lad,’ Old Rennie remarked upon seeing his *magnum opus*.

‘I thought I would do another self-portrait, sir, this time full on as the other one was in profile,’ he told his master.

‘Quite, quite,’ the master muttered, nodding his head, then laying the large piece of paper on his desk. ‘And you want this one to go in the exhibition?’

‘Yes, if you think it’s good enough.’

‘It’s more than adequate, my lad.’

Mr Rennie was about to say something else when he stooped over the page to examine the autograph more closely, and said, ‘I see you have signed your work.’

‘Yes, sir, and so has my cat,’ he joked.

The teacher was hardly impressed. ‘Three initials? I thought you only had two.’

‘Well ... You see, sir, I’ve decided to distinguish myself. So I’ve adopted a middle name.’

‘And what might that be?’

‘Spaceman.’

‘Your nickname?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I see. Well, I suppose you’d better sign the others as well and in the same way. Have you decided what else is going on show?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The boy fetched a big folder, the sort that artists call their portfolios, and dipped inside, pulling out a few more sketches; some in charcoal, some in watercolour, and the rest in coloured pencil.



The teacher took a good look at all of them, and whilst examining these he muttered: 'Of course, Spare had three initials, you know that, don't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

Old Rennie gave the boy a quick smile, a sign of recognition, as if he knew what he was up to. Jason was about to smile back when he noticed the old man started shaking his head.

'Something a matter, sir?' the boy enquired.

'Nothing wrong, my lad, except there are now far too many. You cannot show all of these at once. I think we should hold back on this one,' he suggested, putting one watercolour aside, 'and this one,' putting another aside, 'and this one as well, I think.'

‘What’s wrong with them, sir. These are some of my favourite paintings.’

‘They’re too much, I think, and the visitors will be overwhelmed by them. It’s best if we show a slow, gradual progression.’

‘But I’m up against much older boys, sir.’

‘I realise that, my lad,’ he replied nonchalantly, ‘but we cannot have you painting like a seventeen year old, when the oldest is only sixteen, and you are twelve. I think it’s best we restrain your talent for now, see what kind of response we get from the audience. If it is positive, we may even be able to lay on a solo exhibition of your more “mature” work.’

He got the young lad to sign the other nine exhibits, and put the three watercolours away. A pity, he thought to himself, as he wanted to show off. Isn’t that what exhibitions are all about, showing off?

‘We now have an excellent selection of your work. It should stand up well against the others. No boy paints or draws as well as you or in the same style, so you can be rest assured your work will make a favourable impression. Once you have got exposure in the local press—which I’m sure you will—we can start looking at making enquiries at one of the art galleries, hopefully in the West End.’

‘Gosh! Do you really think so, sir?’

‘I do, lad, I do. Now leave the rest to me. I take it you have copies of these?’ he asked, pointing at the ones spread across his desk.

‘Only photos my dad took of them.’

‘That should be sufficient. It’s just in case we lose one or two. Of course, I’m not expecting that to happen. But you will have to reproduce them if we do. Do you think you can do that?’

‘I should be able to, sir.’

‘Good because we must keep track of your work from now on, signed, dated and in chronological order. Let’s get this exhibition over first and we’ll take it from there. But make sure you keep all your work from now on, even the ones you think are poor, so we can show some order of progress.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I take it you’ve built up quite a portfolio already?’ he asked, looking at the boy’s folder.

‘Yes, sir. I’ve got more back at home.’

‘I bet you have. All done through your magic, no doubt?’

‘Not all, sir. A few pieces, yes, but most have been through my own effort. I feel at times, when I’m switched on, that they just flow through me, and I have little control over the outcome. I seem to be inspired at times, a well-spring of inspiration.’

‘I see. And what do you intend to do next week, I mean, when you’re

on holiday?’

‘Work, sir.’

‘Yes, I thought you might. Any particular subjects?’

‘Science and history,’ he yawned.

‘Well don’t over do it. And make sure you’re at the Town Hall on the first, as soon as it opens.’

‘I will, sir.’

The boy left the teacher’s study, for once feeling that things were going well for him. He couldn’t believe it. Mr Rennie was already talking about another exhibition and referring to his works as if they were actually worth something. Now he wished he kept all the others he had done, but threw them away thinking they weren’t up to scratch.

He bumped into old Cavanagh on the way down the stairs. But the older boy did nothing, ignored him and continued on his way.

Even Crazy Cavanagh is no longer interfering with my will, he thought to himself.

It seemed everything was on his side. First an exhibition with the other boys, then his own, and then what after that? ‘The world here I come,’ he announced to nobody in particular.

* * * * *

As he expected, the exhibition had drawn quite a crowd. It was the first day, a Saturday, so it was bound to be busy. Jason, all dressed up and looking smart, his parents to either side of him, walked proudly through the big wide doors. He half-expected there to be a red carpet rolled out just for him, a crowd applauding, flashbulbs on cameras going off every few seconds as soon as he entered. But it was far different, a rather sombre affair with the genteel mayor extending his hand to his parents and greeting the young Jason with the words, ‘And this must be Jason, your son,’ and then patting him on the head like some prize poodle. Jason hated anyone doing that because it made him feel small. One day he would be big, maybe not so much in stature, but certainly in name. He was sure of it.

The exhibits on display had been arranged as announced in the newspaper, with the older boys’ works first, then little Jason’s right at the other end of the long hall, a room used normally for lavish banquets. Mr Rennie had been meticulous in arranging Jason’s exhibits, ensuring the best piece, his self-portrait with the cats, was right at the centre so people couldn’t help but notice it. The work was slightly higher than he would have preferred. It should have been lower so as to give an immediate impact on the eye of the beholder, practically at eye-level. Being high up

meant that Jason was rather looking down at people in the picture, but it still had an uncanny effect for when you walked past it the eyes seemed to stare and follow you. This was probably more due to the lighting, with one light deliberately aimed at the centre of the face so that it was the focal-point of attention, and the pastels for the eyes, normally non-reflective, in this instance did reflect the light, heightening the effect so they looked like two pinholes of white light.

His dad nodded his approval, as did his mother, who then both went off to talk to some people they knew, probably from the social club, leaving Jason standing all alone in front of his pictures.

One old woman asked if he was the artist. He replied he was indeed. She remarked how beautiful the cat looked, so proud and majestic, then asked him if he could paint her little moggie back at home. He replied he would be ever so glad to. She asked the fee. He suggested to speak to his father and pointed him out to her. She left with a smile and wandered off. That could be the first possible customer of the day, he thought. But would there be any more?

Other visitors mentioned they found some of his work macabre. This got Jason thinking, because he thought none of it fitted that description. It was all light-hearted, genial, and not dark of tone. If he wanted to be macabre he would have brought the rest, for they really were macabre being based on paintings by Spare with grotesque figures, defoliated trees and barren landscapes stalked by spectral shadows. Now they were macabre! Or was it just something people were picking up on, perhaps sensing an underlying current, something latent like the way the cat stared out at them, the same way it had stared at Jason that night?

One fellow even offered to buy the self-portrait as a present for his wife! Why his wife would want a portrait of someone she had never even heard off, and that by a schoolboy, he could not imagine. But the best was the man who came up to Jason, looked at each painting, his head bobbing up and down as he examined them closely, then looked at the boy and just smiled, walking off without even saying a word.

‘What was all that about?’ he asked himself, and was relieved to find some of his schoolmates had come to see his work for themselves, even congratulating him on being the best in the show.

It would be the last time he would see them, for when he went back to school at the start of the next term he was going to be in a totally new class with other boys he didn’t know, perhaps only seeing this lot at break-time. Being here with them kind of brought him down to earth and made him realise the importance of connecting with other people. He didn’t want to be alone like Spare, who only had his cats to keep him company, never being married or having children of his own. That

sounded too much like isolation, of cutting oneself off all in the name of one's art, or being a Black Brother, as Old Rennie called it, someone who rejected the world of appearances to concentrate on the inner world, rejecting the rest of the world as shallow, superficial and unreal.

When his parents returned the other boys were asked to move aside as the photographer for the local paper had arrived. He wanted to get a good shot of Jason standing in front of his works, a nice clear shot, especially of the one in the middle. Jason, never one to like being photographed, tried to give a look of indifference, austerity, refinement, etc., until his mother kept nagging him to smile, which he begrudgingly did. And it was this last shot he regretted for it ended up in the evening paper on the third page, with the caption 'Boy Genius Shows Promise.' He had to read the article twice to make sure it was really referring to him. It certainly had his name (as Jason Jones, not Jason (Spaceman) Jones), but where the writer got all his 'facts' he didn't know. The article appeared to be a warped version of him, as if someone had filled in the missing pieces based on hearsay. And as for being called a 'Boy Genius,' he resented it. A genius? Who do they think they were kidding? He was just a boy showing promise, so why not call him that.

'All newspapers exaggerate, son,' his father was telling him as he cut out the item for his scrapbook. 'It sells copies. And you're going to have to get used to it. Expect it from now on, son. I mean it.'

His father just didn't understand what being called a genius meant. For a genius is someone who has a brain far superior to everyone else's. He can do anything, not just draw, paint, sculpt, but also do lengthy calculations in his head, write poetry, produce literature which will be read well past the time he's dead, play chess blindfolded, invent ships that never sink, cars that run on water, planes that never fall out of the sky, come up with totally original designs, win acclamations and awards, complete crosswords in seconds, be an expert on all subjects, and speak multiple languages. Now that's a genius! Not him!

'Stop being facetious,' his mother no doubt would say, but he wasn't being facetious, he was being realistic. If everyone thought he was a genius, he decided he better live up to it and first thing in the morning he was going to do some serious studying, getting all the books out of the library he could find on history and science. Then perform a little ritual to help him in his endeavours.

'If you want a genius,' he started telling the world, 'then I will give you a genius.'

He just prayed he could handle it.

Chapter Fourteen

‘God, I hate history,’ he told himself, dipping into what books he could find at the library, mostly on English history as he knew that would be part of the curriculum for the next academic year. He was also going to have to learn all about the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Stone Age, geological periods like the Neolithic, Mesozoic, etc., dinosaurs which were said to have lived 65 million years ago—a bit before his time—and many other epochs which formed the history of this country and how Britain came to be what it is today, invaded by Romans, Vikings, Angles, Normans, with such an influx of different nations one could say the Britain was a multi-nation and really had no identity of its own.

But what use had he, a young boy, for history? He was only interested in the future because he had no past himself, except through his ancestry. The future was the way forward, with all this new technology coming out, like computers for the home. They were saying one day everyone would have a computer and be so small it could fit on your lap, and in the future be reduced to the size of a matchbox once the technology became available. That was surely more interesting than the past.

‘The past is history. The future is science,’ he declared to himself.

It reminded him of his granddad. Every time his parents took him round to see him all he could do was talk about the past. Why? Because he had no future. All he had were memories of the past. However, he always managed to tell the boy some great stories, and would rattle on about what happened when he was a young man in the fifties after the war, and when rationing finally finished, and about London, the new clubs and bars opening up everywhere as Britain recovered from the war and became more affluent. Yes, he was a great story-teller, but that was

all he could do as if his mind was now looking backwards to the past, unable to face a future which perhaps for him was uncertain or no longer expected. Jason hoped he wouldn't be like him when he got to his age.

As his history teacher, Mr Lodge, often kept telling them in class, the importance of history is it tells us how we got here. The past shapes the present which in turn shapes the future. All major events of history have shaped how this world has become what it is today. If we look at all the wars, the revolutions, the major religions even, which have impacted on the world, they have in their own little way changed the course of history. Usually these events start off small then expand exponentially, affecting the rest of the world. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 sparked off World War One; Germany invading Poland in 1939 sparked off World War Two; the missile crisis in Cuba in the Sixties nearly sparked off another war; Argentina invading the Falkland Islands in the early Eighties sparked off another war, and so it would continue. It seemed history was written in blood, through violence and revolution. A whole government could be toppled by the actions of one man inciting a riot; the overthrow of a mad dictator could change the whole course of a nation; despots and tyrants, like Genghis Khan, showed that each man could contribute to a change in the timeline of not only his own country but the whole world, and throughout history its little epochs could be traced to the actions of one man who would become famous through them, like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, Nelson, etc.

Little Jason wondered if he would ever be like them and enter the pages of history. Who would be writing about him in the future, he contemplated. Nobody, unless he started doing something meaningful with his life, and made some sort of impression on the world.

He realised he had been dreaming away, not studying at all. He was confused, trying to get his head round all these events which had gone on to change the world. There were so many, where should he start?

He needed a booster, a little ritual, to help him absorb all of this information, then regurgitate it in the exams. He knew he had to have a thorough grounding in the history of his own country first, then he would tackle world history afterwards.

He set aside all the other books which didn't appear to deal with British history and started browsing through the four remaining ones. Technically, they were written for adults. He could tell just by the long words being used with complicated explanations of events surrounding the kings and queens of this country; the 'abdication' of Edward VIII, the English 'reformation' during the reign of Henry VIII; the 'execution' for 'treason' of Charles I, etc., these were terms he was going to have to

comprehend. What is treason? Abdication, what does that actually mean? Reformation—the reforming of what?

How does one learn history, he wanted to ask himself. History is a sequence of events. Only by understanding the sequence can you understand how and why each event occurred.

‘Then how do I formulate my desire to know history?’ he asked himself.

He was worried that if he didn’t get the words right, the ritual would backfire. The problem was, history encompasses such a wide field. It could mean the history of the world and its the geological periods, or the universe, how it began, going right back to creation. He had to narrow it down and work on bite-size chunks; too large and he would be overwhelmed. But nice size chunks of information he could handle. It would then require several rituals, one for each aspect of history.

He messed around with different ways of writing it down, like ‘I DESIRE TO KNOW HISTORY.’ That was way too big. Or ‘I DESIRE THE HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY.’ That didn’t sound right either. Then how about ‘I DESIRE TO KNOW THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH NATION’? Would that work, he wondered. He could only but try. If it wasn’t successful it would be because it was too precise or not precise enough.

He formulated this desire into a sigil, memorised it, charged it, dropped it and went out to play.

Little Austin was no longer little. He had now grown into an almost fully mature cat. The eye colouring, although the same, was now much deeper, bordering on turquoise, depending on how he looked at you and the amount of light hitting his eyes. In the dark the pupils did indeed glow red, a deep shade of red like burning embers. Offset by his smooth black coat, they looked like fires from hell. Of course, Jason made many sketches of them, mostly in pastels, and had become so obsessed with them when they were that colour, he transferred them to his own eyes in another fine self-portrait, even retaining the same shape of the pupils so he resembled a cat, and it was difficult at times to tell which was which, as if Austin and Jason were now somehow interchangeable.

This idea was enhanced as Jason was outside playing with Austin, rolling around with him on the lawn in the back garden. He couldn’t exactly throw sticks for Austin and get him to fetch them, but he liked to provoke Austin into a bit of play-fighting with a broken off branch and flicking it in his direction. Austin would then leap on to the branch, biting and scratching it, and digging his claws in, then rolled around with it as Jason tried to pull the branch away.

It was during this play-fighting his father came outside with his new

camera. Seeing his son play with the cat, he thought it would make a good snapshot for the family album.



As he pointed the camera and shouted ‘Smile,’ something peculiar if not extraordinary happened. Jason, who was rolling around on the ground with the cat, stood on his knees to face the camera and folded his arms against his chest. Then suddenly the cat leapt on to his right shoulder and also faced the camera just as it clicked, remaining perched there like a parrot on the shoulder of a pirate. It was as if somehow he knew a photograph was going to be taken and wanted to be in on the action. His father had never seen anything like it before. And even stranger still, when he got the roll developed the following day, the photo, which he considered to be perfect in composition, showed both of them looking at the camera, and they were both smirking. It was uncanny. Jason loved the photo so much he begged his dad to get it blown up, just the top half, from the chest up, and neatly cropped, not in colour, preferably in black and white.

‘Why, son?’ he asked him.

‘Because I’m going to use it on the cover of a brochure for my next exhibition,’ he proudly replied.

All play and no work makes Jason a dunce, he thought to himself. It had been a couple of days since his little ritual. Nothing was happening, Nothing sparked off a chain of events. Nothing triggered the floodgates to open. The door to the secret room remained closed. Probably because nothing happened externally to remind him of his desire—until now—when he opened a drawer and saw his history books staring back at him.

They were hidden on purpose so he would forget all about the subject. Seeing them reminded him, and suddenly he was overwhelmed. The gate burst open. A wave was unleashed. It came flooding through thick and fast, so powerfully he was knocked back and ended up lying on his bed, face up, trembling.

‘Ugh!’ he screamed as he saw the Romans marching along Ermine Street, Watling Street and Fosse Way; the Vikings in their long ships coming to shore in Kent over 1500 years ago; the Normans, the Angles, the Saxons, dividing up kingdoms; successive kings and queens sitting on thrones, the coronation of Henry VIII in 1509, the beheading of Anne Boleyn in 1536, Charles I requesting another shirt to stop shivering before he went for the chop, Mary Queen of Scots forgiving her executioner before he chopped her head off in 1587, James VI of Scotland becoming James I of England, Victoria marrying Albert in 1840, the death of Elisabeth I in 1603, the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, the Dunkirk landing in 1940, the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Great Fire of London in 1666 ...

Just as it occurred in his history exam, it was all coming back to him, but jumbled up, not in any chronological order. However, the dates were now correct. But the order of the events wasn’t.

It was like watching a long film, badly edited, bits spliced in here, bits spliced in there, the film running forwards, then rolling backwards, jumping to the end, going back to the beginning, stopping, rewinding, repeating over and over again, interminably.

‘Ugh!’ he screamed again, rolling on his bed, trying to quash the sights and sounds pouring into his head, the facts and the figures, the wars, the revolutions, as if they were all happening simultaneously.

He clasped his ears trying to deafen the noise, but still he could hear everything.

‘Ugh!’ he screamed again, closing his eyes, but that made it worse. He could see it all in his head; having his eyes closed made not one bit of difference.

‘Ugh!’ he screamed again, hiding his head under the pillow, clutching

the bed, begging for it to stop. But it wouldn't stop. It kept coming in, waves of history, all flooding in, event after event, then gradually diminishing to a mere trickle, allowing him to eventually fall asleep.

'My God, you look terrible,' his mother declared. 'Have you started having those nightmares again?'

He simply nodded and wearily made his way to the breakfast table, his head all sore, his eyes bloodshot. He slumped over his breakfast, barely able to lift a cup of coffee to his lips.

'You're not constipated again, are you?'

'Mum, please! I just had a bad night.'

'You certainly did. You didn't even come down for your tea last night. We kept shouting it was ready. Your father found you in bed, still dressed, with your head under the pillows. If this continues, we're going to have to take you to a doctor.'

'Mum, I'm fine. Stop fussing over me.'

She then touched his forehead. 'Well at least you haven't got a temperature.'

'Mum, I'm all right, honest.'

'Then eat up your breakfast. Come on.'

He took one look at his plate: fried bread, eggs, bacon and baked beans, and felt sick. He pushed the plate aside and settled for some orange juice instead.

His mother huffed and took his plate away. 'I don't know what your father is going to say,' he could hear her muttering away to herself in the kitchen.

He closed his ears and tried to unwind. His sleep, what little he had, was dreadful, full of facts, dates, names, places, bombarding his mind like an endless stream, or a dream that was so real he felt he was living it: he was Oliver Cromwell, King John, Richard III, all these and more, or King Harold getting shot in the eye with an arrow, living and breathing each king, each reign, each conflict like a play that not even Shakespeare could have written.

What was the point in having all this knowledge? So that he could just churn it out in an exam?

He decided he was going to sit down in the afternoon and go through some old exam papers and see if it was possible to get them all correct, even the ones which were two years above his level. In that way he could tell whether his little ritual had worked properly or not. It had worked; he got a result, but what he wanted to do now was to test it and see if his poor fried brain had retained the knowledge, and could find the correct information and spit it out.

He devoted the whole afternoon to going through the exam papers Mr

Lodge had kindly lent him. The teacher knew he was eager to get up to the same level as the others who were going to be in his new class. He suggested working through each one, advising him to take his time. Don't rush, he said, just think about the answer, and (most important of all) read the question properly, for it was no good trying to answer a question if you weren't sure what it was asking. In an actual exam, it was very different. The pressure was on. The clock was ticking, and there were at least 20 questions to get through. Also, nerves kicked in, and sometimes little Jason would find himself getting self-conscious, worried that his handwriting, although not illegible, yet hardly neat either, who ever marked his paper might not be able to read it.

He put these worries aside, and concentrated on the first paper, covering questions about the monarchy and the English constitution. Surprisingly, he found the answers were coming rather easily, as if there was a mnemonic in his head, and he could recall names, dates, places without really having studied the subject properly. Even though it was a mock exam, he still set himself a time, 10 minutes more than required, just to get into the swing of things. By the end he answered all the questions with still 5 minutes to spare, and checked them against the marked papers, ticking each one as he went along and discovered he got them all right.

Wow, he thought to himself. That was easy. And moved on to the next one.

This was a higher grade paper, for thirteen year olds, the sort of paper he would get next year, and only slightly above his academic level. It was to do with the English Civil War, 1642–1651, between the Roundheads and the Cavaliers, why it started, how it was resolved, and Oliver Cromwell's involvement. Jason had never broached this subject before. He doubted if he could even answer the first question. But as he sat down and set the timer, then read through all 15 questions first, he found the answers were just coming to him. A switch had been turned on and they flowed out, like his brain was a computer clicking away, with all the information readily at his disposal.

Not to get too confident at first, when time was up he thought he'd better check his answers. They were all correct. He uttered another 'Wow,' and proceeded to the next one.

By the end of the afternoon he completed five papers, a total of nearly a hundred questions, in the space of three hours and forty minutes, with a pass rate of 100%.

Satisfied, he sat back and relaxed, knowing that when it came to the start of the new term he would be able to sail through history lessons with no problem, and probably had a good deal of more knowledge than

was actually needed. That should impress the teacher and the other boys, he thought. But that was only one aspect of history. Class also involved European history, American history, and things like the abolition of slavery, the suffragettes, the assassination of Gandhi, the fall of the Roman Empire, the Peloponnesian War, the Battle of Carthage, Hannibal and his stupid elephants, and so on and so forth ... Where will it all end, he wanted to ask himself. He would need a lifetime to cover the whole subject of history. He had to put a limit somewhere and fix it at a reasonable cut-off point, one that did not go beyond the curriculum for his last year at school.

He would keep to his plan of working in bite-sized chunks. Come tomorrow it was going to be the history of the United States. 'That should be fun,' he remarked sarcastically.

* * * * *

He followed the same procedure as before, trying to whittle down a short sentence which formulated his desire, trying out various phrases, like 'I DESIRE TO KNOW THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES.' That sounded a bit long-winded. How about 'I DESIRE TO KNOW THE HISTORY OF AMERICA'? But that could include all the Americas; North, Central and South. As he was trying to think how to word it, Austin jumped on to his lap and demanded to be cuddled.

'You don't have to worry about things like this, do you, Austin?' he asked, stroking the cat's head. Austin just closed his eyes and loved to be tickled under his chin. He would curl up into a ball in Jason's lap when he did that, looking like a little baby, without a care in the world.

'No worries,' he told the critter, and put Austin down.

'I DESIRE TO KNOW THE HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICA.' That will do nicely. He sigilised it, charged it, and forgot it, and took Austin downstairs for tea.

'You look pleased with yourself,' his mother commented at the table.

'No, just been playing games with Austin, that's all,' the boy replied, half-lying.

'You know the exhibition finishes tomorrow, don't you?'

'I know. So?'

'Well, son, we think you ought to go down there again,' his father suggested. 'You know, put yourself around, get noticed, that kind of thing. You haven't been in the paper since the first day it was held. People may have forgotten about you. And you remember what Oscar Wilde said, don't you? There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about ...'

‘And that is NOT being talked about!’ he finished the sentence for him, having heard it umpteen times.

‘Exactly,’ his father rebutted. ‘It would be great to finish off the summer with another piece in the paper.’

‘But I’ve got studying to do tomorrow. There’s only two weeks left before I’m back at school.’

‘Studying what?’ his mother asked him.

‘Science. I’ve got a whole load of books to get through.’

‘You can do that in the evening,’ his mother chided him. ‘Do as your father says. He will run you down there first thing.’

‘Okay,’ the boy moaned. ‘But can I take Austin?’

‘I don’t think they allow cats in the Town Hall, son,’ his father replied.

‘Why do you want to take him anyway?’ his mother asked.

‘It will be good publicity,’ he replied and smiled.

His parents looked at each other and twigged. Perhaps it would be a good idea, and agreed, as long as the cat was kept in the carrying cage Jason used for taking him to the vet.

After dinner he got comfortable on the sofa and started watching TV. He could hear his parents talking softly in the other room, saying things like, ‘We’ve got a clever boy, there,’ and ‘What do you think he’s got in mind?’ But he had nothing in mind. If he took Austin along, a beautiful cat like him, he was sure to get noticed. If a journalist was there to cover the last day and saw him with his cat, he might write it up in the local paper. Even the same photographer from last time could be there as well.

His dad joined him on the sofa and put his arm round his son and snuggled up to him. The programme he was watching finished. His father instinctively reached for the remote and switched channels. It was time for the news. Reports about inflation, a crackdown on violence in the UK, miners on strike, disputes in the Houses of Parliament, Margaret Thatcher—having won a third term in office back in June—was now giving some rousing speech, blah blah blah. Jason yawned. Cynically, like an old man, he saw news as being about the same things happening to different people in different places. There was nothing exciting or newsworthy in the news. It was all boring. He even thought of going to bed early until his dad, probably also bored by the same rubbish, switched channels to watch a film. Oh, no, Jason thought to himself, as soon as he saw what type of genre it was. A Western! Despite being made by Italians, but filmed mostly in Spain, and starring one of his favourite actors, he was now seriously worried. It was to do with the American Civil War and the blowing up of some lousy bridge. Then someone started waving the American flag, the Stars & Stripes, and it all

came flooding back. Jason could feel the giddiness coming on and the trepidation begin as it always did when the floodgates opened, the pounding in his head getting louder as the door started opening slowly.

He excused himself, complaining he had seen the film too many times already, and rushed upstairs. His father looked to his wife, as if to say, 'What's the matter?'

'He's having one of his funny turns again,' and shook her head and went back to her knitting.

'Oh,' he grunted, nonplussed, and went back to watching the film.

She was right. But this time it felt worse like he was a cork floating on a stormy sea, being tossed this way and that, submerging, coming up for air, then drowning in American history.

'Ugh!' he screamed as the American Constitution unrolled before his eyes—all of its seven articles and all 27 of its amendments, the Declaration of Independence was being signed, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address of 1863—he could actually hear it as if it was being given by the president himself, and saw his assassination in 1865, Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 after his election in 1801, America's involvement in the Vietnam War in the Sixties, John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963—the Zapruder film on endless replay ...

'Ugh!' he screamed again, rolling on his bed, pulling at the sheets. 'Stop,' he cried out. But the information kept coming ...

The American Revolution of 1775 to 1781, Benjamin Franklin's kite experiment in 1752, the American Civil War (just like the film he was watching, but now very real), the Mayflower coming up the Hudson River in 1620, the Salem witch trials of 1692, the Boston Massacre and Battle of Golden Hill in 1770, the Boston Tea Party of 1773, the Great Fire of New York in 1776, Washington's re-election in 1792 and his death in 1799, the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, the Slave Trade Act of 1800, the Battle of the Alamo in 1836, the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 1848, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Alaska Purchase of the following year ...

'Ugh!' he screamed again. 'Stop, stop,' burying his head in the bed. It was useless.

The Great Chicago Fire in 1871, the Battle of Little Bighorn and Alexander Graham Bell inventing the telephone in 1876, Thomas Edison inventing the light bulb three years later, the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral and James Garfield's assassination in 1881, Billy the Kid being shot dead by Sheriff Pat Garrett in the same year, the Washington monument's completion in 1885, the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890, gold being discovered in the Yukon's Klondike in 1896, William McKinley's assassination in 1901, Henry Ford founding his motor company in 1903

and the founding of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1908 and the establishment of the FBI in 1935, the United States declaring war on Germany in 1917, the Depression of 1920–21, the Scopes Trial of 1925, the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929 followed by the Wall Street Crash, the Empire State Building opening in 1931, John Dillinger being shot outside a cinema in 1934, the Hindenburg disaster of 1937, the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 ... and so it went on for what seemed like eternity till he eventually lost consciousness.

'God, you look awful,' his mother moaned.

'Please, Mum. Not this morning. I've got a splitting headache.'

'You're not on drugs, son?' his dad asked.

'Dad, I'm only 12!'

'Well, sit down, lad, and eat your breakfast. Then I'll take you down to the Town Hall.'

Eat? That's the last thing he wanted to do. When he said he had a splitting headache, he meant it. It felt like his head had been split in half, right down the middle, and the two hemispheres of his brain were visible. He heard from the older boys what it was like to get drunk. You feel great until the next morning, then you feel terrible. You wake up with a hangover and your head feels sore. If this was anything like it then he was going to abstain from alcohol indefinitely when he got older.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but he must have done. His mother had to come up and shake him awake at ten telling him Austin was starving and needed feeding. He remembered segments of the information he received, and for some reason it started coming through in chronological order, right up to ... He couldn't remember. Something to do with the Manhattan Project and the development of the A bomb, some black woman called Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus, and Martin Luther King delivering a speech in Washington in 1963 and his assassination in Memphis five years later. That's all he could remember. He would be glad to go out today, just to get over his hangover.

The Town Hall was sparsely populated; a few people here, a few people there, the interest obviously having dwindled over the four weeks since the exhibition opened. He wasn't expecting much today, didn't think it would be busy, and planned on chilling out next to his exhibits. He pulled up a chair, put the cat's carrying cage underneath it. No one objected to him bringing Austin in, so why should they object to letting him out?

He checked, made sure no officials were looking, picked up Austin out of the cage and held him up to his face, telling him to make sure he behaved himself or he'd find himself back in the cage. As if totally

obedient, Austin made himself comfortable on his master's lap and was rewarded with some gentle strokes. He was soon digging into Jason's knees with his long claws, stretching, yawning, and eventually fell asleep.

In no time at all, visitors would come over to ask Jason about his works, and then see the cat and admire it. Occasionally Austin would arouse himself and open his eyes, stretch a bit, then fall back to sleep, as if he wasn't bothered about all the attention he was getting. Normally he craved it. It looked like he too was chilling out today.

Jason wasn't quite sure what to expect now that he was here. He couldn't claim to any form of psychism but he had a funny feeling something was going to happen, unsure what precisely. He would have to be patient and wait for the event to unfold.

He didn't have to wait too long.

A pleasant gentleman came up to him and started making polite conversation, telling Jason he recognised him from the picture in the paper. He was impressed by his artwork and wondered if could do a small write up for another local paper. He turned out to be a journalist by the name of Trott, but his friends called him Trotter.

He pulled up a seat and made himself comfortable, pulling out a pad and pen from his jacket and started making notes based on Jason's answers. Where was he born? How long had he been painting? What did he think the future held, that sort of thing, then asked if it would be all right to take a photo of him and his cat. Jason agreed. Trotter called over to another man, his photographer friend, and asked him to take a photo of 'Jason and his partner in crime,' as he jokingly put it.

Jason was trying to get the cat awake, to make him more alert for the photo. He didn't seem to be too interested. Jason had to keep nudging him whilst the photographer bent down on his knees to get a low angle shot of Jason, the cat in his lap, and some of the exhibits behind him.

It was then Jason noticed that funny man from the first day of the exhibition, the one who looked at the artworks, bobbing his head up and down, then looked to Jason, smiled and walked off without saying a word. He was back again, doing the same thing, yet when he turned to Jason to smile, out of shot of the camera, Austin suddenly stood up, his back arched, and started hissing and snarling at him. The man made an immediate retreat and exited. Austin calmed down and just watched the man leave the building, then settled back down in Jason's lap. The whole incident was bizarre to say the least. The photographer and journalist looked to each other then to Jason for an explanation. All he could do was shrug his shoulders, pat Austin on the head and joke that Austin was his guard-cat. He really wanted to tell them that Austin was his familiar,

here to protect him, but he didn't think they would appreciate that.

Both men thanked the boy and left, shaking their heads.

Jason wasn't worried. As long as he got his name in the papers.

'You clever boy,' he whispered to Austin, and stroked him under his chin, to which Austin yawned and went back to sleep. It was obviously the event Jason knew was going to happen. If only he could understand why it happened.

If that little incident didn't get a write up in the paper then nothing would, he thought. He would get his dad to buy the paper the next day and see what it had to say. It would also be interesting to see if the photographer caught Austin in the act. He wondered what the caption was going to be this time: 'Artist's Cat Gets Ready For Backlash'?

Just as he was about to leave for the day—the hall would be closing early—Jason noticed Mr Rennie had put in an appearance, probably to collect all the paintings and make sure they got back to their owners.

He came over to Jason to say hello, telling him the whole exhibition had received a fantastic response, especially his work, and that he should be proud. Jason was.

'Oh, I see you've brought your cat along today as well.'

'Yes, he's my saviour,' he replied. 'I thought he should be here as well since he was my inspiration for some of my paintings.'

'I see, my lad. Well, why not. I suppose you've been busy doing some more drawing and painting?'

The boy replied: 'Of course. I've got another portfolio already, and I've designed the cover for the brochure for my next exhibition.'

'Being a bit presumptuous, aren't we, my lad?'

'But I thought you said ...'

'I know what I said. I just think it would be a better idea to postpone your next engagement until we have found somewhere suitable. There are about thirty galleries in the West End alone, and not all of them will find your work suitable, shall we say, especially regarding the subject matter.'

'I don't think they will find anything objectionable. They are only portraits of Austin, myself and some landscapes. Surely, no one here has objected to my work?'

'No, I wouldn't say that. But they have certainly been noticed, put it that way, and raised a few eyebrows ...'

'Which reminds me,' the boy butted in. 'There was this rather strange man here earlier on. He was here the first day as well. He kept looking at my pictures in a peculiar way. He would then smile and walk off. I don't know who he was but Austin didn't like him. Did you, Austin?' he asked the half-asleep cat.

‘Really? What did he look like?’

‘Oh, I’d say he was about fifty-ish, with this black mop of hair and a huge nose that came out to here,’ the boy exaggerated. ‘And he smelt funny as well.’

‘I see,’ the teacher replied, with a twinkle in his eye.

‘You know who I mean. Don’t you?’

‘Well, put it this way. I’ve heard of him. Haven’t actually seen him myself. But I think the man you’re referring to is Eckenstein, a Jewish immigrant who came over here with his parents during the war.’

‘But who is he? I mean, why is he so interested in my pictures?’

‘He’s your rival, you could say. He’s being trying to emulate Spare’s work ever since he heard of him, claims to be an expert. A complete failure, of course. His work will never equal that of Spare, and I don’t think you need worry about him either. He was probably just checking out the competition.’

‘We’ve got a funny feeling we’ll be seeing him again.’

‘We?’ he asked, confused.

‘Austin and me.’

‘Of course.’

Mr Rennie instructed the boy to help clear up his things. The hall would be closing shortly, and he wanted to make sure all the paintings were packed away in time. The boy did as he was asked, and said a fond farewell to Old Rennie and took Austin home.

The following day, his father came back with the paper. As promised, Trotter did a write up on Jason and his work. It was only a small piece, yet his father was delighted as it was another item for the scrapbook.

The article was headed ‘Jason And The Scared-y-Cat,’ with a medium-sized photo of the pair just as Austin reared up, with Jason glancing to his right where Eckenstein would have been, but not in the shot. The actual write up was quite accurate compared with the last one. And the best thing was it also mentioned Jason’s next exhibition, with its time and place ‘yet to be announced.’

Jason was then asked by his mother what scared the cat. He replied it was just this funny man who apparently Austin didn’t like.

‘Very strange,’ she remarked. ‘But then cats are said to be peculiarly sensitive as if they have a sixth sense.’

If that was true, then his premonition about seeing the man again was also going to happen. And he had a pretty good idea where: at the next exhibition.

Chapter Fifteen

It was now time to test his knowledge of American history. As he previously believed, it was no good having all this information in his head if he couldn't get it out. It would be like storing something away, in some dark corner, and a few years down the line you completely forgot where you put it. It must be accessible, retrievable and ready at all times.

He thought of his mind being like a filing system; there was space for everything, and everything had to be in its right place. The retrieval system he used was dependent upon association, a system of mnemonics, the easiest being tying a knot in a handkerchief, or memorising the order of the colours of the rainbow (ROYGBIV = *Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain* = Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo and Violet), or the order of our planets (MVEMJSUNP = *Men Very Easily Make Jugs Serve Useful Needs, Perhaps* = Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto), or the correct order of the kings and queens of England, the order of the periodic table, or whatever else was necessary to remember; they could all be applied to this system of ordering and remembering. But it should be so precise that it is void of clutter. The brain, like a computer's hard drive, can only store so much, and you don't want to waste its disk space by cluttering it up with rubbish. Not only would you run out of space, it would also take the computer longer to find the data it is looking for. So the whole system had to be finely honed, pared down into snippets of information, and these snippets would then take you to more information if required, like an index card in a library with a title, a brief synopsis, and the shelf number where the book could be located.

So, for example, the Boston Tea Party would lead you to 1773: the

year should automatically pop up because of its close association with that event. But you had to understand why it happened in order to put it into some kind of context. It was no good just being a computer (essentially a storage and recall device), you had to understand the motivations of the people involved (the Sons of Liberty), why they were protesting, and the political motivations behind their actions which resulted in them dumping chests of tea into Boston Harbour.

Good, he thought to himself, now I've got that settled, let's see what a mess I make of this.

He gathered all the papers relating to the subject and sorted them in order, the easiest ones first, then on to the more academically advanced, and finally the last one, dealing with the Manhattan Project, the atom bomb, and its use at the end of the war on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

The first paper was very simple. He had 30 questions to answer in 45 minutes. He set the timer and put pen to paper and proceeded. The questions he thought were so easy even an eight year old could answer them. 'When was the Boston Tea Party?' What a surprise! 'What year was John Adams elected president?' 'Who was the first person to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776?' etc. They were all pretty straightforward, either requiring a date, a name or a place. Simple one or two words answers, perfect for a computer.

He completed this mock test in just under 20 minutes, less than half the allocated time, and it was supposed to be aimed at his grade and age group. Unbelievable!

The next paper, as he expected, was a bit more complicated. He had to provide explanations in his answers, all 15 of them, and had an hour. Some were straightforward again, like 'Why did America get involved in the Second World War?' and 'Why did John Wilkes Booth assassinate Lincoln?' Others needed more thought like, 'Give a reason why the Naturalization Act was passed into law in 1870,' requiring a few words to explain, hardly the sort of question a computer could answer.

But he could. In thirty-five minutes he managed to answer all of them and checked them against the marked papers and found they were all correct, although the wording in other people's answers tended to differ slightly, yet said essentially the same thing.

By the end of the afternoon he answered all the papers, his right hand practically dropping off after having to write a two page essay on the major events and battles in the American Civil War, and a three page essay on the Manhattan Project, another one on the Cuban Missile Crisis, it's connection with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, and why Kennedy demanded the removal of missiles from Cuba in the first place. 'Phew!' he wheezed, 'that was hard.' But compared with the answers

provided by others, his were correct, and he was happy.

Having nailed that subject, his next was going to be science. But where do you start with a subject like that. Again, it was such a vast area, from the invention of the light bulb, to the Big Bang theory of the creation of the universe, from chemistry to physics, from biology to astronomy, the Doppler effect, x-rays, gamma rays, infrared, electricity, gravity (which didn't seem to exist until Newton discovered its laws), solar flares, periodic tables, the elements, optics, the theory of relativity, and so it went on.

The best way, he concluded, was just to start browsing through what science books he had, most of them borrowed from the library, and some exercise books, to discover the parameters and define the limits. Again he didn't want to go too far ahead of himself, just enough knowledge to take him through the next few years, possibly to the end of his schooling.

There was just one more week to go before school resumed. He heard rumours that they were splitting science into different classes to become biology, chemistry and physics, possibly at the start of term. Should he follow suit and split the subject into these subsets as well? That was the only way to make it more manageable, assuming the rumour was correct. It really made little difference. Then all he had to do was apply each in turn to the relevant lesson. The only problem was, what papers he had procured from Mr Brookes, his science teacher, were all to do with science and not divided into those subsets. He would have to go through the whole subject, but do a ritual for each subset, as each was covered in the papers, but spread across all the questions.

Let's tackle biology first, he thought, and started looking at all the sections he could find which related to biology in his science books, reading a bit and looking at some of the diagrams and pictures. In one, he found a photo of a dissected rat, something they would be doing next term, and not something he was looking forward to having seen what Austin brought into the kitchen the other night—a half eaten mouse. In another, diagrams of chromosomes. In another, a drawing showing how babies were born. Another one showed all the bones of the body and their names, and so it continued till he had a reasonable idea what biology encompassed.

He formulated his desire as 'I DESIRE THE KNOWLEDGE OF BIOLOGY.' Charged his sigil, dropped it and went downstairs for tea.

Jason didn't engage much with his parents during the meal as he was worried they may spark off a chain reaction and suddenly he would be overwhelmed with information. Instead he just listened to their mindless chatter. Mum was going on about Mrs Bluesworthy down the road whose dog got run over this morning and how she was hysterical (Jason had a

vision of the dog, its guts spilled out, and he could see every internal organ as if it was there right in front of him), or Mr Drummond—the poor man, his mother called him—who broke his leg on the stairs outside Sainsbury’s (Jason could see the fracture in the tibia with his x-ray eyes), and Mrs Henson’s daughter Christine was going to have another baby (Jason could see it being conceived, the sperm uniting with the egg, the whole fertilisation process, the gestation itself, the foetus floating in its amniotic sac, getting bigger and bigger, the limbs growing, the eyes developing, the little fingers becoming more defined, and finally being born as if he was there in the hospital), and his mother reminding him he needed to take Austin to the vet again as he may have worms (he could see into Austin’s stomach, his intestines, his alimentary canal, etc.).

‘Mum, please,’ he begged. ‘Not while I’m eating!’

‘What’s a matter, son?’ his father enquired. ‘Aren’t you hungry?’ pointing at his son’s half-eaten plate.

‘Yes, come on, Jason,’ his mother urged him on. ‘Eat up.’

But as Jason looked down at his plate, he didn’t see a breast of chicken; he saw the whole chicken with the piece of meat still attached to the bird. He could see how the bird hatched from an egg, how its feathers grew, how its heart was beating 280 to 315 times per minute when it was alive, and all of its other organs functioning normally before it ended up on his plate.

Then he looked at his hands holding the knife and fork. He could see his bones, tissues, muscles and joints as if his skin had been peeled back, with each part labelled, like the phalanges, the metacarpals, the lunate, the trapezium and trapezoid, the ulna and radius leading into the hand.

Then he looked at his mother. Suddenly her teeth became exposed. He could see her lower mandible, her tongue, the uvula at the back of the throat, the food being masticated in her mouth and swallowed, seeing it pass down her oesophagus, and then he looked to her eyes staring back at him as if he was seeing a ghost. He wasn’t. He was seeing her as a flesh and blood being, full of muscle and tissue and bone, like the orbital bone round her eyes, the eye socket, the optic nerve, even her brain.

A shudder ran through him. He jumped to his feet, and excused himself from the table, and rushed upstairs to the bathroom thinking he was going to be sick.

But his parents just looked at each other, now getting used to Jason’s whimsical behaviour. His mother sighed, ‘I think he’s also got worms.’

‘Perhaps we should take him to the vet as well,’ his father joked and carried on eating.

But it was no joke for Jason. He thought he was now seriously deranged. Seeing his reflection in the bathroom mirror, it was like having

x-ray vision, like this guy he saw in an old film who ended up plucking out his eyes because he could see too much. So could Jason. Not only were all his internal parts visible, he knew each and every part, their names, how they worked, their interaction with each other. He could see his blood being pumped from the heart and other fluids circulating round his whole body, the fluid surrounding his brain, his Eustachian tubes, and the effect of air beating against his tympanic membrane, seeing it vibrate like the skin of a drum with each sound-wave.



‘I am biology. We are all biology,’ he declared, and staggered to bed. ‘Feeling better now, are we?’ his mother asked as he woke up.

He just nodded and looked around, finding himself in bed, with Austin lying next to him, stretched out with his head up and eyes half-closed, which reminded him of how he finally fell asleep, his eyes half-closed in an effort to stop seeing everything, expecting now to see into his mother, all flesh and blood and bone. She looked normal, back to her old self. Thank God, he thought.

‘I brought you a cup of coffee,’ she told him as she placed it on his bedside table.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ and watched her walk out.

It was if the visions he was having last night had worn off. He now reverted to some form of normalcy.

‘Thank God,’ he cried aloud this time, relieved.

‘So what are your plans for today, young man?’ his dad asked him at the breakfast table.

‘Not much. I’m going to get on and do some more studying this morning, and some practice exams this afternoon.’

‘On what subject?’

‘Biology.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, you know what that’s all about, don’t you, son?’ he jested, winking at his wife, and brushing his son’s head with his large hands.

Yes, he did know what it was all about, not in the way his dad was implying, but he pretty much found out last night. He felt he had been immersed in the world of biology. It was coursing through his veins. He could not only see it, he could breathe it, and understood where he had come from, how he got here, and was remarkably aware of all the genes that constituted him as a person, even his DNA, as if somehow he had put on a special pair of spectacles and could see its code written out in large letters: A C G T A C G T A C G T A C G T A C G T, endlessly repeating, and formulas in hexagonal patterns and random letters.

He considered it would be a cinch when it came to biology classes, although he had misgivings about dissecting animals. But he could compensate for that by stating all his knowledge was so far theoretical, text-based, and this knowledge needed to be applied to the practical side of things. It was useless otherwise, like a doctor learning a course on open-heart surgery but never lifting up a scalpel, or a pilot learning how to fly in a simulator without stepping into an actual cockpit. It had to be carried out in a real situation.

It would be the same when it came to chemistry by undertaking actual experiments, and the same in physics, playing with things like electrical currents and resistors. It was only when you worked with the knowledge by applying it that it became real. It was all very well doing it on paper, but could he do it in the classroom?

As for opening up people and taking out diseased tissue or tumours, forget it. He hated the sight of blood, and was already getting squeamish at the thought of some poor rat pinned by its feet to a table, spread-eagle, and about to have its gut sliced down the middle.

And just looking at these pictures in some of his books put him right

off the subject. But as an artist he had to consider there is beauty in everything, as Spare would have said. The human body is beautiful if it is in correct proportion, but he only wanted to look at it from the outside, although he also had to concede there was something innately noble and majestic in how it worked inside, and intelligence in how it had been put together. Then he came to a couple of pages with two photos in black and white, one on each page and facing each other. They were of a fully naked man and a fully naked woman, both standing with arms down by their sides and looking straight at the camera. Little Jason started to wonder what happened when he closed the book because they would both be touching each other; he closed it and opened it several times, watching the two pages coming together, and imagined their bodies connecting. He was unsure what happened after that.

Then his mum asked him to put his stuff away; lunch was now ready.

Should he ask her, or should he ask Dad? He contemplated asking both separately, not to see if one was lying and the other was telling the truth, but to get two sides of the same story, from a male and a female perspective. He would ask them later, perhaps when the time was right.

After lunch he started going through some of the papers relating to biology, starting with what he thought would be the easiest first, dealing with the various parts of the body, the functioning of the organs and names of the bones. He set the timer, allowing himself an extra ten minutes on the first paper, and got stuck in.

Half an hour later he finished. It was all theoretical and therefore easy. Simply naming parts and ticking multiple choice questions. Against the marked paper, he found he got all the answers right. He was relieved, and wasted no time going through all the relevant questions on the other science papers, each one highlighted for identification. But it wasn't till he got to the last paper he started struggling. It was all to do with genomes, the genome sequence of the nucleotides (A, C, G, and T for DNA genomes) which make up all the chromosomes of an individual or a species, and the related formulas, most of which he was struggling to understand. They just weren't coming through easily. This is something he was going to have to work on, not just the formula for genetics, but the chemical formulas for everything; blood cells, hormones, endocrine secretions, everything that went into making a person what he was, stripped down to a load of chemical symbols.

He took an hour out and started going through every formula he came across, drawing it and writing down the letters and numbers. Once he understood the sequences, he went back to complete the paper and found it now flowed out simply because he had a grounding, and that's what was needed. But it wasn't till he turned the paper over he found it was for

17+, someone five years his senior. No wonder he was struggling.

‘Wow. If I can do that, I can do anything,’ he repeated to himself.

The next practical step was to move on to chemistry. Some of it had already been covered in biology, and it was hard to distinguish the two because they kind of overlapped.

Again he spent some time in the early evening going through what he could find on chemistry, reading about its history, how it came from the Arabic word ‘chemia’ and entered our language as ‘alchemy.’ The old alchemists were the first chemists for they were playing around with compounds trying to find the fabled elixir of youth or the philosophers stone to turn base metals into gold. When he thought of it in that way, it sounded interesting, and he could imagine himself being an alchemist in some dungeon that passed for a laboratory, working with furnaces and alembics, with all of these tubes and glass flasks everywhere, straight out of a Frankenstein movie, heating up liquids, mixing powders, working with the processes of distillation and coagulation, etc.

As an artist was he any different? He mixed compounds called paint. He used powders called charcoal and pastels. He worked with liquids like water to mix down the watercolours, and like the alchemists, he was on his own quest, seeking perhaps not the elixir or stone, but his very soul which he believed he would be able to discover through his art.

Viewing it like that made the bland art of chemistry, with all of its apparatuses and strict scientific disciplines, much more appealing. It really involved compounds composed of atoms, elements, and molecules (the combinations of atoms as in their composition, structure, properties, behaviour, also all the changes they undergo when reacting with other compounds), how these atoms and molecules interact, the chemical bonds which unite them to form other compounds, and the different types of chemical bonds. As he knew previously, everything can be reduced to a chemical compound, or to a chemical formula. There was probably a chemical formula for the entire universe, if a long enough piece paper could be found to write it down on.

As with any science it was just a matter of getting to grips with the terminology. And what is science but the art of naming, in the same way that Linnaeus gave names to plants, the astronomers (the star-namers) gave names to stars, etc., and sometimes it helped to know the etymology of a term in order to understand its meaning.

He put the books down, thinking he had a fair grasp of what the subject involved. As before, he formulated his desire as ‘I DESIRE THE KNOWLEDGE OF CHEMISTRY,’ then went through the routine procedure, wondering this time what would happen. But since he used repression to forget about it, even wondering about the outcome was no

longer on his mind.

He sat down for tea, looking slightly chuffed. His mother noticed.

‘You’ve had good day, I take it?’

He tried not to answer. The last thing he wanted to do was to think about what he had just been doing, and concentrated on his meal instead.

‘I hope you’re going to eat it all, my son,’ his father commented. ‘We don’t want what happened last night, do we?’

Jason honestly couldn’t remember what happened last night. It might as well have been two weeks ago, a month ago, for all he cared. But he was certainly hungry tonight, tucking into juicy steak, roasted potatoes, carrots and peas, the latter tasting slightly different from the ones they normally have.

His mother must have picked up on it by his expression. ‘Sorry, about the peas, love,’ she started to apologise, ‘I couldn’t get any fresh peas today so had to buy processed peas instead. Not quite the same, are they? They taste different, I know. It must be those chemicals they put in them. They don’t even look the same, not the same colour at all. Must be all those artificial colours they use,’ she was saying to his father.

Jason was trying to close his ears. The last thing he wanted was a reminder. Too late. As soon as she mentioned ‘chemicals’ and ‘artificial colours’ it all came flooding back.

‘It is a combination of two artificial colours, E102 and E133,’ he blurted out, not even sure where that came from.

‘What was that, son?’ his father asked him in disbelief. ‘Don’t tell me you’re studying chemistry now?’

That was another word he didn’t want to hear. He simply nodded, finished his meal as best he could, but leaving his half-eaten peas, and left the table, dashing upstairs as the giddiness came on.

His parents just looked at each other and shook their heads. ‘He’s going through a phase,’ she explained to her bewildered husband. ‘You know, changes in hormones, that kind of thing.’

‘Oh,’ he responded.

His father, who—let’s not forget—was once a twelve year old himself, must have gone through a similar passage of change, couldn’t remember dashing upstairs all because he didn’t like the colour of his peas. He picked up Jason’s plate and helped himself to what was left.

‘They taste okay to me,’ he remarked, and really couldn’t tell the difference.

Upstairs Jason was going through more than just a phase. His head was being bombarded by chemical formulas. He was seeing codes written out, atoms and molecules being broken down, chemicals flowing into other chemicals, liquids being turned into solids, then back into

liquids then into gases, compounds being isolated, rebuilt, mixed, remixed, and lastly whole galaxies being born and dying, all based on chemical principles. Nothing too heavy, then.

He was woken up by his father sitting on his bed, gently nudging him awake. It was late, apparently, and he had overslept.

‘Son,’ his father started to say, in a soft, gentle tone, ‘I think we need to have a little chat. Your mother and I, well, we are concerned about you, worried about you. We just want to know what’s going on. Now, if it’s anything to do with puberty, I can understand, my son. After all, I’ve been through it myself, and it maybe time to have a chat, you know, about what it means to be a man ...’

‘I’m all right, Dad,’ he mumbled, barely awake. The last thing he wanted was his dad giving him a lecture on the birds and the bees. He knew it all. He had enough knowledge on biology, chemistry, and god-knows-what-else to last him a lifetime.

‘Are you sure, son?’ he asked him genuinely, stroking Jason’s blond mop of hair.

‘Yes, Dad. Honest.’

‘Okay then, son. You’d better get up. Your mother cooked you a nice breakfast. So do me a favour, make sure you eat it.’

‘I will do, Dad.’

‘Good boy. And I suggest you lay off the studying today. Do something else. Play football. Go see a film. We bought you a lovely bike and you hardly use it.’

‘I will do today, Dad. I will go for a long ride.’

‘Good. That’s what I like to hear. Now get up, don’t keep your mother waiting any longer.’

It was a Sunday, probably a good day for a bike road. The roads wouldn’t be so busy and he would cut through town and go up to the park. He thought he would head to the lake, what he called the duck pond, and took some leftover bread with him to feed the ducks. He used to do this nearly every weekend with his dad when he was just a toddler and still in his pram. He liked to watch the ducks, the way they came out of the water and waddled towards him, gathering round, coming right up as each one tried to get a morsel of bread. In a way, it made him feel important, as if somehow he couldn’t imagine them being able to survive without his generous contribution to their welfare. When he ran out of bread, he would watch them all waddle back into the water, realising the game was over, and there was nothing more to be had from him. They would then go off, find somebody else offering food and gather round again, taking their little babies with them. Now they weren’t so little, about four months old, but still clinging to their mothers and going

wherever she went, following her in her wake.

After feeding the ducks, he sat down on the bench and pulled out some paper and his pencil and started sketching one of them, a big mallard, and wished he had brought his colouring pencils so he could capture the green plumage of its head. It seemed to sparkle and glint in the summer sun as if made of tiny plates of metal, reflecting the sun when at the right angle. Then he thought of Old Rennie, what he told him about the artist who loved fishing, and could see beauty in the scales of a fish, whole colours, rainbows, and understood what the man meant. To be an artist is to see beauty in everything, the natural beauty of the world we live in, from the tiniest blade of grass to the largest cloud in the sky. They were all there for a reason; each part of the world had its purpose, its reason for being there.

Jason, as if overcome by an epiphany, a sudden awakening, stopped sketching and looked up to the sky. It was cloudless, and he could see afar, right up to where the blueness of the sky ended and the blackness of space began, and felt a tear trickle down his cheek as he sat there motionless in wonderment, and realised that not only was he small in comparison with the rest of the universe, like a grain of sand on a seashore, but also that he was large, for he contained within himself the whole universe; he was in the universe and the universe was in him: he and the universe were one.

If that is the case, he thought, then really the universe is an extension of myself. So whatever I do will affect the rest of it.

He decided to put it to the test and shook himself out of his deliberations. He must have been lost in deep thought for ages for it was about mid-afternoon now, well past lunchtime and time to head home. But there was a little experiment he wanted to carry out first.

He remembered the story of Spare causing it to rain on a cloudless day. He wondered if he could do the same. Now that he had a good understanding of not only Spare's system but also his own place in the universe, he thought it might work.

There were now few people around and few clouds, if any. He turned over his piece of paper and wrote down his desire, keeping it simple: 'I DESIRE RAIN,' turned it into a sigil, and charged it by placing it to his forehead—just as Spare had done—and dropped it, throwing the paper away in a bin, and got on his bike to ride home.

Negotiating all the traffic through town certainly took his mind off things. He had to wend his way through narrow spaces between cars, zigzag round queues of traffic, cut across back streets and alleyways, up and down pavements, and round the corner past the Town Hall. But it wasn't till he got to the top of his street that he realised the sky had

become overcast. It was darker now. Soon he could feel specks of rain hitting his bare hands and head, and looked up to see a giant black cloud above him and smiled.

Unlike Spare, Jason managed to make it home just in time before the full onslaught came.

‘Oh, look at that!’ his mother fumed at him in the kitchen. ‘I thought as it was such a lovely day I would get on and do the washing. I was just about to put it on the line outside. Now look at it,’ she complained, looking at the back garden through the window. Rain was lashing hard against it. ‘I’ll never get it dry now. Typical English weather!’

She turned round to see her son taking his jacket off. ‘Well, at least you didn’t get wet,’ she remarked, totally ignorant of what, or rather who, caused the rain. All Jason could do was smile.

‘You’re a bit late. You missed your lunch,’ she continued, helping him to take off his jacket and hang it up. ‘Do you want anything to eat?’

‘I’m okay, Mum.’

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘I thought I would do some more studying this afternoon.’

‘You might as well. You’re not going to be able to go outside again. Look at it!’ she complained once more.

He could hear her tutting away as he was picking up Austin who had come into the kitchen to greet his master.

Jason carried him into the back room, stroking his head, and stood by the window and looked out, as did Austin, as if he had never seen rain before.

‘Wow!’ he breathed, watching it pelting down outside. ‘If I can do that, I can do anything,’ he repeated again, this time with absolute faith in himself.

He put Austin down and carried his books and papers over to the table and sat himself down and started going through them for his mock chemistry exams, highlighting the relevant questions, about ten in each paper. Some he obviously couldn’t do as he didn’t have a chemistry set—perhaps his parents could buy him one for Christmas—as they were based in the lab. He would need Bunsen burners, test tubes, Petri dishes and access to phosphorus, sulphur, and other substances for which he would need to be over 18 and have a licence. But at least he could do the theoretical side of the tests, and again set himself ten minutes over the required time, clicked the timer and started.

The first paper was easy, with questions like ‘What is an acid?’ He answered, ‘Any substance containing a pH of less than seven.’ ‘Give the colour of the universal indicator for each of the following:

0 to 3/strong acid (Jason put red)
 4 to 6/weak acid (he put orange/yellow)
 7/neutral (he put green)
 8-10/weak alkali (he put blue)
 11-14/strong alkali (he put purple).'

That was easy, he thought, and went to the third part of the question, 'Give the formulas for these common acids:

Hydrochloric Acid (Jason put $\text{H}_2\text{O}:\text{HCl}$)
 Sulphuric Acid (he put H_2SO_4)
 Nitric Acid (he put HNO_3)
 Phosphoric Acid (he put H_3PO_4)
 Ethanoic Acid (he put CH_3COOH)
 Chloric Acid (he put HClO_3)
 Perchloric Acid (he put HClO_4)
 Acetic Acid (he put HCH_3CO_2).'

Again, easy. Next question. 'What are atoms?' 'They are the smallest recognised division of a chemical element, made up of three known particles. 1. A proton. 2. A neutron. 3. An electron.'

Next part. 'What is an atomic number?' 'The number of protons in a nucleus.'

Third part. 'In the table of atomic structure below showing the electrical charge and relative mass of each of the three major sub-atomic particles comprising an atom, give the relative mass for each one.'

Particle	Relative Charge	Relative Mass
Proton	+1	(Jason put 1)
Neutron	0	(he put 1)
Electron	-1	(he put 1/1836)

Easy. Next. 'What is the periodic table?' 'It is an organised table of over 100 elements which comprise all matter.'

Second part. 'Who compiled this table and how is it arranged?' 'It was compiled by Dmitri Mendeleev. He arranged the elements in order of the mass of their electrons.'

Third part. 'Give the two ways the periodic table arranges the elements and explain how they work.' 'The periodic table is arranged in periods and groups. In the first, the number of protons in the nucleus of the atom increases by 1, going from left to right. In the second, arranged

vertically in columns, the groups contain elements with the same kind of properties.'

And so it went on. By the end he finished again with time to spare. Checked the answers and found he got them all right.

He went through all the other papers, questions on the Reactivity Series, what causes Glow Sticks to glow, why are some fireworks different colours from others (calcium you get orange, strontium and lithium you get red, iron you get gold, sodium you get yellow, magnesium or aluminium you get white, etc.), alloys and their different types, what causes matchsticks to burn (phosphorus, which is a highly combustible element), the Ozone Layer, how much salt (NaCl) does the average human body contain, what is the most abundant protein in the human body, what are noble gases, etc. All relatively straightforward. More advanced questions on organic chemistry, the three states of matter, amino acids, the difference between aliquot and diluent, define a molality, define titration, what a buffer is in chemistry, how 'mole' is defined in chemistry, the difference between fractionation and distillation (this reminded him of the processes used in alchemy), the formula for calculating the pH of a solution, the difference between molarity and normality, define valency, the chemical composition of fat in the human body, why graphite rods are used in nuclear reactors, the difference between oxidation and a reduction reaction, what iron ore is made of, etc.

By the end of the afternoon he completed over 60 questions in a little over three hours, what should have taken at least four and a half, and all present and all correct.

Whew, he wheezed to himself, and mopped his brow. Not only had he been answering questions for his own year, but also the year above that, the year above that, and above that, well past his schooling years. In fact, he was now at university sitting for a degree.

He couldn't wait to go back to school next week. 'I will show them all what a genius really is,' he told himself. But he had to come back down to earth. In actual exams he would have to carry out experiments as part of the curriculum; his theoretical knowledge was fine, it was just a matter of applying it.

It would probably be the same with physics. He should be able to do all the theoretical stuff after a booster, a little ritual, and it should be no problem, but he would have to do the practical at school.

He would tackle physics in a bit. He just wanted to get away from the table and his studies and get his legs to work again. He looked outside. It had stopped raining. He didn't even realise; with his head in the exam papers, the whole world might have imploded and he wouldn't have noticed. It must have stopped a long time ago because Mum's washing

was hanging on the line, and most of it looked dry already.

He found Austin curled up on the sofa, picked him up and took him outside so they could both get some fresh air. Austin was being lazy as usual. He didn't appear to do much these days. Certainly didn't chase after the ladies. Perhaps he was going through a funny phase as well, as his mother would have put it.

'You're not one them funny cats, are you Austin?' he joked with him, and stroked him under the chin. But Austin just purred.

He played with Austin outside for awhile, then helped his mother to bring the washing in and went upstairs.

He was not looking forward to his next subject. Not that he didn't like physics—it's part and parcel of the universe we all live and breathe in—it was just another technical subject he was going to have to get his head round.

What is physics, he asked himself as he sat down, looking at the few books he had on the subject. Is it just the study of matter, energy, and the interaction between them, as any dictionary would commonly define it? Surely there was more to it than that. 'Is it all about asking fundamental questions, trying to answer them through observation and testing our observations by formulating hypotheses and carrying out experiments based on those hypotheses? What do physicists do all day? Formulate theories? Turn energy into matter? Matter into energy? Do they teleport themselves round the universe? I mean, what do they do with all that knowledge? Try to change the world?' he was asking himself, frustrated.

He could ask all these questions, but could he answer any of the big questions like 'How did the universe begin?' or 'How will the universe end?' or 'How does the Sun keep on burning its fuel and will it ever run out?' or 'What are the basic building blocks of matter?'

He hoped to be able to answer all them some time in the future. He was no Isaac Newton or Einstein. He knew that. He didn't even know what Einstein's theory of relativity really involved except that it was written ' $E = MC^2$ ' and that E = Energy, M = Mass, C = Constant, the speed at which light travels in a vacuum (186,000 miles per second), constant because it never changes, and from this theory the atomic bomb was developed. He learnt that much studying the Manhattan Project.

He appreciated that we wouldn't have the technology we do today if it hadn't been for physicists asking questions and doing work in pure research. Our theoretical understanding of electrons is what led to the development of the television, the telephone, the microwave oven (what his mother called a godsend), and everything else we take for granted, even the computer, and all the computer games the kids were playing in the arcades, or the machines you see in hospitals used for treating cancer

through radiotherapy, or devices for detecting earthquakes. But it also required a good understanding of mathematics. He was pleased he got that out of the way first because it was all theoretical and many of the problems in physics can be applied by using mathematical equations; complicated things in nature could be reduced to relatively simple mathematical relationships which in turn could be revealed through creating mathematical models and testing them.

Just looking at some of the mathematical equations used in the books were daunting at first, but probably more complicated than they looked. Thank God, I've done maths, he thought, for to understand what physics was all about he was going to need a certain amount of maths.

After an hour of browsing, it was time for tea. He formulated his desire: 'I DESIRE THE KNOWLEDGE OF PHYSICS.' His sigilised his desire, charged it, dropped it, then went downstairs to satisfy his hunger.

This had become something of a routine now, and he decided it was going to be the last time, unless of course there were other subjects on the next curriculum he was not aware of. His parents were giving him the same look as if to say, 'What's going to happen this time?' But as his mind was completely blank, he had no idea what they could possibly be inferring.

'Looking forward to going back to school next week, are you?' his dad asked to get the conversation going.

Jason just nodded and got stuck in. This time it was his favourite; shepherd's pie with lashings of rich gravy, carrots and beans.

He was just about to take a mouthful of beans when he noticed his parents were staring at him as if something was about to happen. Or was there some private joke between them he didn't know about?

'What's the matter?' he asked in all ignorance.

'Nothing, dear,' his mother replied.

'Come on,' his dad urged him on. 'Eat up.'

He did as his father suggested, still not sure what was going on. Was his food poisoned?

'The beans all right, dear?' his mother asked him.

'Fine,' he nodded.

'Good, because I cooked them in the microwave.'

'The microwave?' he asked himself. Oh no! Then it all came flooding in, everything he knew about microwave energy. He tried to repress it, putting down his knife and fork, and thought he had. But when he tried to continue eating by picking up his knife and fork it was impossible. It is only possible to pick up an object like a knife or fork, not because they are light, but because gravity is a weak force, he thought. Then he started thinking about Newton's law of universal gravitation, how every particle

attracts every other particle in our universe with a force which is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between their centres. Then he thought of the earth, its gravitational centre produced from its rotation, and the moon how it orbited the earth due to gravity and how this planet, the moon, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and all the other planets were held in motion by the pull of the sun. It was too much, especially to think about over dinner.

He could feel the giddiness coming on. The gates were very slowly opening. There was nothing he could do but excuse himself from the table once again, leaving his half-eaten meal. He dashed upstairs.

His father, furious, threw his napkin down on the table and was about to get up and give his son a good seeing to when his wife stopped him.

‘Leave it, dear,’ she begged him.

He settled back, folded his arms in protest, and shook his head.

In his bedroom, Jason was doing more than just shaking his head; he was shaking all over, trying to get out of his head all the formulas, the equations, the mathematical constructs, the laws of this, the laws of that, bloody E, bloody M, and bloody C squared, and all the other theoretical physics it was possible to cram into such a small space as the head of a twelve year old.

He kept shaking his head, but stuff kept coming through. He could see equations, like Newton’s second law ($\Sigma F = ma$), momentum ($p = mv$), weight ($W = mg$), motions ($v = v_0 + at$), centripetal acceleration ($a_c = -\omega^2 r$), work ($W = F\Delta s \cos \theta$), rotation ($\omega = \omega_0 + at$), etc. And so it continued, all through the night, not as heavy as before, but like a long, never-ending stream of information, a data-flow.

Lying on his bed, it felt like he was in a floatation tank surrounded by all this liquid full of numbers, symbols, English and Greek letters, making him buoyant. Then he felt he had no weight, that he was free of gravity, beyond Newton’s law, and drifted away.

He couldn’t remember falling asleep. But he must have done since Austin was kind enough to climb on to his back some time during the night when he was asleep. Jason could feel this weight as he began to regain consciousness; it was bearing down on him, causing him to panic thinking he really could defy the laws of gravity, if it wasn’t for this thing on his back holding him down. Then he realised it was only his cat.

Austin wasn’t too happy about being roused from his sleep, and begrudgingly moved to the end of the bed, allowing Jason to turn over and stare up at the ceiling, contemplating what it would really be like to be weight-free like an astronaut in space. Then he remembered prior to nodding off he was musing over escape velocity and worked out the amount of thrust needed to lift an object weighing a ton off the earth. He

couldn't recall the answer but had all the maths worked out and knew how to solve it as a theoretical problem.

Then he heard his mother calling for him to come down for breakfast, to which immediately Austin's ears perked up. The cat roused himself out of his slumber and jumped off the bed and out the room, not even waiting for his master to follow him this time. It was as if the critter had become conditioned like one of Pavlov's dogs since breakfast time for Jason meant breakfast time for Austin. Jason just smiled and dragged his heavy body out of bed, fighting against the weight of inertia, and put himself into motion at a steady acceleration of 0.5 miles per hour.

'Well, Jason, it's a good job your father had to go to work early this morning,' his mother started nagging him at the table. 'He was going to have words with you again, young man.'

She put his breakfast in front of him, a couple of poached eggs with soldiers, the sort of thing he used to have when he was a kid, as if she was treating him like a kid again, and sat down opposite.

'Well?' she continued to nag him. 'Are you going to explain yourself? You went all funny again last night. I don't know what your father must be thinking right now.'

'Mum, please,' he begged her, cutting off the top of the eggs, dipping his soldiers in the gooey yoke, and seeing it dribble down the sides. 'I'm under a lot of pressure at the minute. I'm starting school soon and I'm going to be in the top class.'

'You won't be for much longer if you carry on like this.'

'Look, I've just been overdoing it a bit. Okay?'

'I see. And what are you planning on doing today?'

'I thought I would take it easy this morning and do some more mock exams this afternoon.'

'Oh no you're not. You're taking Austin to the vets this morning.'

'Why? There's nothing wrong with him,' he protested, watching Austin happily wolfing a tin of Whiskas.

'Oh yes there is,' she countered. 'He eats far too much, if you ask me. And look at him; he still hasn't put on any weight.'

Weight! That was another thing he didn't want to think about. Especially after last night.

'Okay,' he sighed, deciding to agree with her just to get her off his back. 'I'll take him.'

'You do that. It's a good job I'm in a better mood than your father.'

God, she did go on sometimes. If she was going to be like this, he would be glad to get out of the house.

He put Austin in his carrying cage and wandered down to the vets, trying to not think about the weight in his hand, the actual load he was

carrying, the amount of force required to keep it up above the pavement. And Austin? Well he wasn't taking it lightly either. He wouldn't settle down as if he had a premonition of where they were going. He hated the vets, and Jason could hear him start to growl as soon as they started getting closer as if he knew he was in for something unpleasant. He wasn't going to like it one bit.

After what seemed like an interminable wait, Jason picked up the cage and carried Austin in to see the vet. As soon as he was out of his cage, Austin was rearing up at the vet, his back arched, snarling and hissing, just as he had done with that man Eckenstein. Austin didn't like this man either. But when Jason told him of the symptoms—what symptoms there were—the vet had to conclude it was probably a case of worms, and prescribed some tablets, preferably mixed into his food. He also suggested a mouth spray would be a good idea and asked Jason to hold the cat and get him to open his mouth. But Austin was having none of it; he wouldn't let Jason go anywhere near his mouth. He started scratching and tearing at the sleeve of his shirt, hissing like they were both the devil incarnate. In the end, Jason was forced to let him go. As soon as he touched the floor, Austin was off, through the open door, into the waiting room, and scratching at the main door trying to get out. He even refused to go back in his cage.

'Okay, have it your way,' Jason told him, and let him out of the vets, with Austin leading the way as if he couldn't wait to get back to the safety of his home.

'You're back early,' his mother said, surprised.

'Well, you know Austin. He's not too keen on vets.'

The cat waltzed calmly into the kitchen as if nothing had happened and immediately settled down like he owned the place.

'And what did the vet have to say?'

'We're to put these tablets in his food,' he responded, waving the bottle in her face. 'But he won't eat it, because, as you say, he has this sixth sense, and he'll pick up that there's something in his food.'

'Well, he should be glad he's getting fed. He treats this place like a hotel, comes and goes as he pleases, I don't know. It's bad enough you not eating, now your cat's not going to be eating either.'

'Mum!' he moaned. She could be unbearable when she was in this mood. 'We'll have to see how he gets on.'

'And look what you've done to your nice shirt. The sleeve is all ruined. What have you been doing?' she growled at him.

'Oh, that was Austin. He wouldn't let the vet spray this stuff in his mouth. I guessed he didn't trust him. He reacted the same way with Eckenstein ...'

‘Who’s Eckenstein?’ his mother asked, frowning at him.

‘That man at the Town Hall ...’ Jason trailed off as it hit home. Of course, he should have realised. Austin didn’t trust the vet. And he didn’t trust Eckenstein either. Why? What was Eckenstein really up to at the exhibition. Twice he came in, didn’t say anything to anyone, ignored all the other boys’ works and was only interested in Jason’s. The man was up to something, that was for sure. And Austin picked up on it, and became suspicious.

Jason reckoned the man would reappear at the next exhibition. If Eckenstein really was his rival then he would probably check out Jason’s latest work to see if there was an improvement. According to Mr Rennie, the next one should be at the end of the year. Jason was ready for it now, yet he was planning on spending some extra time painting to increase his portfolio, so there would be more to choose from. But first he had to get on and do some mock physics exams and get them out of the way.

Jason settled down at the table after lunch and went through all the papers, highlighting the relevant questions. There were fewer in this subset, about forty. He reckoned they were rather complicated, requiring more than just simple yes or no answers.

As usual, he put the easiest ones at the front and the harder ones at the back and gave himself three hours to complete the lot. Once in full flow, he didn’t want to stop, but keep working through all of them until they were completed.

Some of them he was familiar with anyway, for they were age old questions, like ‘Would a heavier object fall slower than a lighter one?’ (No, because if the object is heavier, the force of gravity would be greater, but since it has greater mass the acceleration would be the same and therefore it would move at the same rate, ignoring, of course, air resistance. This was summed up in Newton’s second law, $F = ma$ where the force of gravity is $F = mg$ (m = mass, g = acceleration due to gravity), so $mg = ma$, therefore $a = g$. So we would expect a feather to fall at the same rate as a pound coin.)

This is probably what Newton realised after being hit on the head by a falling apple. It was amazing to think how a whole equation and law came out of that one little incident!

Next question: ‘Why does an object float in a liquid denser than itself?’ (If the object is completely immersed in a liquid denser than itself, the resulting buoyant force would exceed the weight of the object. This is because the weight of the liquid displaced by the object is greater than the weight of the object—since the liquid is denser. As a result, the object cannot remain submerged completely and will be forced to float. This is called ‘Archimedes’ Principle.’)

Next, a question he loved as it reminded him of last night, how he felt before he fell asleep. ‘Why is it when you are in freefall you feel weightless even though gravity is pulling you down?’ (Because there is no force pushing against you—your body is not touching anything. Gravity is pulling equally on all the molecules of your body, creating the sensation where no forces are acting on you, making you feel weightless. This is the same sensation as if floating in space.)

Jason the Spaceman could relate to that.

The next question asked: ‘What is the difference between centripetal acceleration and centrifugal force?’ (The first is the acceleration an object experiences as it travels at a velocity along an arc. The centripetal acceleration points towards the centre of the arc. The second is the imaginary force any unrestrained object experiences as it moves around an arc. This force acts opposite to the direction of the centripetal acceleration. It reminded him of when he was in the car and his dad made a sharp turn to the right. Jason started sliding in his seat away from the centre of the turn towards the left. It was a good job he was wearing his seat belt otherwise he would have slid all the way over to the left and bumped up against the passenger door, possibly receiving an injury. He felt as if he was experiencing some kind of force. He now realised it was centrifugal force.)

This led to a question about travelling in a car which he found intriguing as it reminded him of an accident he saw, or rather its aftermath, where two cars collided and he could not believe how much damage each one sustained, although they both must have been travelling about the same speed (the speed limit was 30 as it was in town) and they both were about the same size, so roughly the same mass, given that both cars had two occupants. The question was: ‘Two identical cars collide head on. Both are travelling at the same speed of 50 mph. The impact force on each car would be the same as hitting a solid wall at what speed? 1. 50 mph? 2. 100 mph? 3. 150 mph?’ (50 mph since the collision is head on and each car is identical with the same mass and travelling at exactly the same speed. Therefore the force of impact experienced by each car is equal and opposite.)

Next question: ‘What is the difference between energy and power?’ (Power is the rate of energy being generated or consumed over a given period of time.)

And so it continued with more questions like the difference between potential energy and kinetic energy, etc. All fairly straightforward, as far as he was concerned. By the time he got to the last question in the last paper he had answered every single problem in physics you could think of, like if a ball is rolling along a frictionless surface then what would be

its velocity ... with various scenarios given. Also questions on energy problems, density problems, friction problems, force problems, kinetic energy problems, momentum problems, thermodynamics problems, etc., until he felt he could write a whole textbook on physics. It took him three hours but he had done it. It all just seemed to pour out as if a switch had been turned on with the information at his fingertips.

He started marking his own papers, and found all of them were correct, perhaps not worded in the same way, but the solutions were identical.

With a sigh of relief he put his pen down and relaxed. However, there was still that nagging doubt in his mind about the practical side of things. It was all very well in theory, but when it came to practice, well that was another problem he was going to have to solve, and that could only happen in the classroom.

Chapter Sixteen

‘It’s great to be back at school, isn’t it, Charlie?’

‘What!’ his old schoolmate gasped. ‘You’ve got to be kidding, right?’

‘Don’t you like school?’ he asked him incredulous, as they were standing outside.

‘No, school sucks.’

Jason felt sorry for Charlie. Okay, he wasn’t the brightest pupil in the school, but he was down to earth and had no pretensions about himself. He didn’t try to make out he was better than anybody else in the school, and if you had a problem he would try to help you out if he could. It was a pity he got picked on by others, all because of his weight, for which they would tease him and call him rude names like ‘Fatso,’ ‘Chubby Charlie,’ or ‘Charlie who ate the Chocolate Factory.’

As if to mollify him, Jason said: ‘You know, when you’re older, I mean, like grown up, you’ll look back at these years as the best time of your life.’

‘Huh! What planet are you on, Spaceman?’

For some reason Charlie wasn’t very happy today. Or was it just jealousy? Was it because Jason was now in the G-Stream and he wasn’t? He didn’t think Charlie could ever be that petty. Or was it because he was going a rough time? His parents were splitting up. It had been on the cards for awhile; his mother was filing for a divorce. That must be hard on a kid like Charlie, the silent, sensitive type.

As they walked back into the entrance he was asking him about what he got up to during the summer holiday. Charlie didn’t seem to want to talk. He was being reticent for some reason and looked like a kid who needed to be pulled out of his shell. They said their fond farewells and

went their separate ways to their different classrooms.

As Jason had been informed, there were only eleven other boys in his class, all the same age, and all with the same academic IQs, apparently.

He sat himself down, not sure who to make polite conversation with, hardly knowing any of them. The atmosphere was not tense but awkward as they all looked around at each other as if to say, 'God, don't tell me I'm going to be stuck with you lot from now on!' Lots of big egos, he thought, which would probably soon be deflated, as this class, and everything that came with it, was going to sort the men out from the boys. Jason knew that. He just hoped nobody was placing too high expectations upon him. He had a reputation now, one he was going to have to live up to and prove he could run the entire gamut and take whatever was going to be thrown at him this year.

The class went quiet as the new head teacher entered and sat himself down behind his desk. He introduced himself as Mr Ridicott and explained this was his first year at Summerby Secondary and hoped that everyone would forgive him if he couldn't remember their names. Jason thought that was a bit much as there were only twelve of them in the class. He then went on to say he would be taking over history lessons as Mr Lodge had left. Shame, Jason thought, as he quite liked Mr Lodge, in a way. (Later he was to hear rumours that the old boy had died. As his first initials were D. C., people started referring to him as 'Deceased Lodge.') Mr Ridicott hoped that they would all get to know each other well, likening it to a ship of passengers on a cruise. If anybody didn't like him or his methods, 'They could bail out or jump ship,' as he put it.

In no uncertain terms, he was making it very clear he would not tolerate any nonsense. He was proud to get this job, to be responsible for the top class of this year, and wanted to ensure they all abided by his rules. He did not specify whether these rules coincided with the school's, but was taking on the personal responsibility for each and everyone of them, urging them all to do well. 'Pull your socks up, or pull yourself out,' was another one of his phrases. He ran a tight ship and expected everyone under his charge to act accordingly.

Jason was beginning to think Charlie may be right. School did suck. He also had an instinctive feeling that he and Mr Ridicott were not going to get on. He didn't know why, but a little voice in his head was telling him to watch out for this teacher. He also had an inkling Austin wouldn't like him either, and was tempted to bring his cat to school one day just to see what kind of reaction he got from Austin when he introduced him to this man.

He also didn't like the way the man kept looking over at him. Jason, never one who enjoyed being the centre of attention, deliberately took a

desk at the back, out of harm's way, he thought. Even so, this man's gaze was directed at him more than the other pupils in the class. Perhaps he read about him in the papers? Or was it because Jason's reputation preceded him and Mr Ridicott had heard all about the 'star' pupil he now saw sitting before him?

Either way, Jason was going to have to play it safe, not extend himself too much, or show off academically. But if push came to shove, he would do.

Now Mr Ridicott was going through the curriculum for the year. As he guessed, Jason was relieved to learn they were splitting science classes into three separate divisions: chemistry, biology and physics. Good, he was pleased with that. But he certainly wasn't pleased when he found out they were increasing the amount of sports on the rotas as it was believed children were not getting enough exercise. 30 to 40% of kids were now obese, apparently, due to poor diet and lack of exercise. Jason hated sports. Thought it was a complete waste of time. As for obesity, who were they kidding? The only fat person around this school was Charlie and that was being a bit disingenuous. Charlie was putting on weight because his parents were going through a bad time. He was eating a lot, not because he was hungry, but because it made him feel better inside, what they called 'comfort food.' It was the only means of solace he could get. Jason, now slim, had shed all his puppy fat and couldn't put on any more pounds if he tried. He could eat a whole horse and still it wouldn't show, just as Austin could eat a whole tin of cat food day in, day out, and not get any fatter. It was simply that his metabolic rate was high and he could burn up fuel quickly. It had nothing to do with worms either. And the fact that he wouldn't eat his food with tablets in it proved he knew he didn't need them. (Jason gave up trying to get him to take his medication. Only then did Austin go back to eating again.)

'Jones, isn't it?' Mr Ridicott called out.

'Yes, sir.'

'We're not keeping you, are we?' he asked, sarcastically.

The class sniggered. Mr Ridicott noticed Jason's attention was drifting. It had indeed. He was looking out the window, wondering what he got himself into, when his teacher pulled him back in.

'No, sir.'

'Good. Keep it that way. Now the first lesson of the day is history. And guess what? You're doing it with me, you lucky lot.'

The rest of the boys sighed. Jason just shook his head in resignation. He knew it all now. This was going to be a very boring lesson, he thought, as it would just be repeating stuff he did in his mock history exams. He wanted to get on to the science classes where he'd be carrying

out experiments, that kind of thing.

‘Something wrong, boy?’

He looked up to see Mr Ridicott meant him. Had he done anything? He didn’t think so.

‘Come here, boy,’ he shouted out.

Jason reluctantly got to his feet and made his way to the front of the class and turned to face the others, his arms hanging loosely down by his sides.

Mr Ridicott got up and walked round him, sizing him up as if he were a piece of meat, trying to work out if he could eat Jason up in one gulp.

‘Stand up straight. Stomach in. Chest out,’ he barked out as if he was a sergeant on parade. ‘Do your tie up. Or don’t you know how?’

The rest of the class sniggered again. Jason did as he was told.

‘Yes, I’ve heard all about you, Jones.’

‘Oh no, here we go,’ Jason said to himself, silently.

‘They tell me,’ (who ‘they’ are Jason was trying to work out—the other teachers?) ‘you have started demonstrating a remarkable aptitude in your lessons, especially in your least favourite subjects.’

As the teacher prowled round him, Jason purposely did everything he could to avoid making eye contact. He could feel the teacher’s eyes burn into him. Instead, he kept his head down slightly, staring at the floor.

‘And that history just happens to be one of them,’ the teacher continued. ‘Is that correct?’

‘No, sir.’

‘You mean, you do like it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And you’re supposed to be quite good at it, remembering dates, that kind of thing.’

The teacher stopped walking round him, glanced to the rest of the class, and smirked.

‘Let’s put it to the test, shall we?’ he asked, again sarcastically.

He stood to the side of Jason so they could have a good look at him.

‘The Great Fire of London?’

‘2nd to 5th September, 1666.’

‘The Battle of Waterloo?’

‘18th June, 1815.’

‘Beheading of Anne Boleyn?’

‘19th May, 1536.’

‘Beheading of Charles I?’

‘30th January, 1649.’

‘Abdication of Edward VIII?’

‘11th December, 1936.’

‘Coronation of James I?’

‘25th July, 1603.’

‘Coronation of Elizabeth I?’

‘15th January, 1559.’

‘Elizabeth II?’

‘2nd June, 1953.’

‘Where?’

‘Westminster Abbey.’

The questions came slowly at first, then with increasing rapidity. Jason, as if growing in confidence, started raising his head, his eyes now fixed on the wall at the back. The teacher looked to the wall as if trying to work out what Jason could see, as did some of the class. Did the boy have a photographic memory?

‘Death of Shakespeare?’ he continued.

‘23rd April, 1616.’

‘Battle of Hastings?’

‘14th October, 1066.’

‘Culloden?’

‘16th April, 1746.’

‘Death of Caesar?’

‘44 BC.’

‘Cleopatra?’

‘30 BC.’

‘South Sea Bubble?’

‘1720.’

‘Charge of the Light Brigade?’

‘1854.’

‘Battle of Bosworth?’

‘1485.’

‘Who succeeded Richard III?’

‘Henry VII.’

‘Okay, Jones. Sit down.’

By the end of the lesson, as Jason was walking out of the classroom, his mind was made up. He was already thinking of ways of getting rid of Ridicott.

Chapter Seventeen

It was good to be back, Jason thought, after this morning's debacle with Ridding-Ridicott, as he was now calling him, and having a satisfying lunch with his old classmates—he couldn't abide any of his new ones—he felt at home with his art teacher, Old Rennie. Thank God it was an all afternoon session.

It was like he missed Old Rennie, like they had some kind of bond. He wasn't sure what it was or how it worked, but it was as if they both trusted each other. After all, Austin seemed to like him, and he had no suspicions about him either, for he was eager to promote his work and ensure the boy 'done himself some good.' It was pure camaraderie, that's what it was.

Old Rennie stood up at the front of the class, as if surveying the boys for the first time. Since he had taught all of them in previous grades, he knew them all already. He was just taking stock of the situation, and probably working out who was going to be better than Jason in art.

That was slightly unfair of him, Jason thought, because although he may be good, he had his own way of drawing and painting which differed from the others. They likewise may have their own way of painting, which he himself might not appreciate, but did that make it better? We'll soon see, he thought.

Old Rennie then asked Jason to come to the front of the class, turned him round to face the others, his hand firmly on the boy's shoulder.

'This is Jones,' he started saying as if he was reading a eulogy, 'who is also known by the name of Jason Spaceman Jones.'

The class sniggered and it also made Jason smile.

'Now young Jones here,' he continued, 'has already had his first

exhibition. You may have read about it in the papers. Along with some of his peers, the show received positive feedback, and I must say I'm very proud of that. But young Jones' work particularly impressed the community, and I am delighted to inform him in front of you all, he will now be holding another exhibition ...'

There were some gasps and eyebrows raised. Jason stood there and accepted it calmly.

'Yes,' he continued, 'his own personal show in one of the top galleries of the West End during the Christmas break for two weeks. Not bad for a boy of 12, heh?'

Old Rennie patted him on the shoulder and indicated for Jason to return to his seat.

'Now I don't expect you all to be as good as Jones. He has a supreme talent which is undeniable and few can emulate his style.' (Old Rennie winked at Jason when he said this, probably with tongue firmly in cheek, but implying that Jason was emulating Spare, and possibly also referring to Eckenstein, who obviously couldn't.) 'But I do expect you all to do your best. After all, you are all here because you are all experts, whether it is in the logical sciences or the abstract expression of art. And what is art but the manifestation of mind. A painting can be a work of art. A book can be a work of art. A film can be a work of art. A piece of music can be a work of art. A thesis can be a work of art, if it is beautiful. And these are all products of the mind. So what we are going to do today is examine some experts of art, from Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, to Botticelli's *Venus*, to Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, to Munch's *Scream*, and I am going to ask you all just one question: What makes these works masterpieces? In other words, what makes them stand out from the rest, and why have they become so famous.'

This isn't exactly what Jason had in mind. He was hoping it was going to be something more practical like actually drawing or painting. Luckily it was only for an hour, then Old Rennie moved on to getting each boy to choose one of his favourite paintings, from any era, and write down why he thought it deserved merit or recognition. This got Jason thinking. His head was crammed full of paintings by the 'experts,' but which one really stood out. He was trying not to select anything by Spare, in case the other boys would say, 'Who?' and then they might go and do some research and find out that his style was identical with Spare and accuse him of plagiarism, or something. Besides, he may have been good, but did he actually produce any well-known masterpieces? No, he didn't think so, and had to find something different, something no other boy would choose, something popular that everyone had seen and knew. Suddenly it came to him. It was one of the most reproduced paintings of

the twentieth century, shifting millions. Everyone had a copy of it in their homes, even his grandmother, and that's where he remembered it from: *Chinese Girl* (also known as *The Green Lady*) by Vladimir Tretchikoff. Ever since it was painted (oil on canvas) in 1952 it became popular over the years, its heyday being around the Sixties and the Seventies. For some reason or other people bought it and hung it up on their walls. But what was it that made it so popular?

Old Rennie was now going round telling the boys to write down the name of the painting and the artist they had chosen. As he went round looking over each boy's shoulder, you could hear a *hmm* or a *tut* by way of approval or disapproval. When he came round to Jason, there was nothing just silence. Didn't Mr Rennie like Tretchikoff?

They were then to write down cogent reasons why they had chosen that picture. What made it so special, he was asking. Why was it a masterpiece, or why was it so popular. That's what Jason was thinking. Was it the unusual skin tone used for her face—a blue-green colour—making it different from any other painting? Or that the young lady portrayed, Monika Sing-Lee who was around twenty at the time, was beautiful? His own conclusion was she represented something that was lacking in the West, a sense of mystery, something which had always been associated with the East, hence her popularity in the West. Jason only managed a few lines. He would have preferred to have a copy of the painting in front of him, then perhaps he could look at it in greater detail and feel something coming from it, for every picture tells a story, and it may be that this one had a story all of its own. He wanted to look into her downward glancing eyes and get her to speak.

Just as he finished ruminating, Old Rennie now set them a task. They were each to do their version of the chosen painting.

There were gasps all round, with each boy petitioning to change their choice, except Jason who remained quiet and elusive. Luckily they had the whole of this term to complete the task, which worked out about 60 hours over six weeks. Then the class was dismissed, except Jason.

'Come here, my lad.' Mr Rennie summoned him, with his wagging finger, to the front of the class.

'Why?' he bellowed, as if he had committed some heinous crime.

'Why what, sir?' he asked in all innocence.

'Why that painting?'

'Why, what's wrong with it sir?'

'It is cheap. It is nasty. It is vulgar, kitsch, cheesy, tacky, puerile. It has no merit, no redeeming features whatsoever, no class, no culture, smacks of pandering to common taste. It is not worth the canvas it was painted on. It is shallow, grotesque, crude, second-rate, substandard,

valueless, aesthetically displeasing, vile, ugly, abhorred by art critics, although for some strange reason the public adored it, and furthermore, it was painted by someone who can't paint.'

'Don't you like it, sir?'

'No I don't!'

'But you will like my version, sir.'

'That remains to be seen. Now, regarding your exhibition, which took great effort on my part to arrange through certain contacts, I might add, it has all been arranged for the 21st December, when we break up, to the 6th January, the day before we come back. It is going to be held at the Le Palais Gallery, off Brook Street. It is not a large gallery but quite spacious and they estimate it can take up to 40-60 works, depending on their sizes, of course. Now, I currently have about 20 of your works here only of which 12 were on display at the hall. So we will need another 40, preferably of varying size and differing mediums.'

'Well, I've already done about half that anyway, sir.'

'So you said last time I saw you. Do you think you will be able to come up with the rest by mid-December?'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Good. That's what I thought. Now, when we were speaking last time you mentioned you had a design in mind for the cover of your brochure.'

'Yes, sir. I brought it with me,' he said, digging into his satchel.

'I thought you might.'

He handed Mr Rennie a mock-up of the cover. It consisted of his name, Jason (Spaceman) Jones, written in big flowery letters at the top, in the middle the photo in black and white of him looking sternly at the camera with arms folded, and Austin perched on his right shoulder, also looking sternly at the camera, with a blank space underneath for the details of the venue and date.

'Excellent. Right, I will send this down to the school printers and get a rough copy done with the details added. We will need some small snapshots of some of your works and some short text describing each one, with other details which you can leave up to me. So next time bring the photos and we will get the inner pages done, say, just four sides, and get the brochure proper completed by the end of the month. We will then get those out and really start pushing this event. Okay, my lad?'

It was fine by Jason. He nodded, and was relieved to get out of there. He sometimes wondered how old he really was; Old Rennie was speaking to him as if he were an adult! But as for his choice of painting he didn't care what the man thought of it. He would make it special in his own way, although he wasn't quite sure how. He would wait till he was inspired. He needed to get a copy first. And knew just where to go.

‘Mum!’ he yelled as soon as he got home.

‘What is it, dear?’ she called out from the kitchen.

Jason ran into find her peeling the potatoes. ‘Mum, can we go round Granny’s tonight?’

‘Whatever for? You never like going round there.’

‘I want to ask her a favour.’

‘Oh, yes. What?’

‘Well we’ve been given this project. And I was wondering if I could borrow that painting she’s got on the wall in her back room.’

‘What painting? Oh, you mean that one by whatsisname, Tittikoff.’

‘Tretchikoff!’ he corrected her.

‘Well, I don’t see why not. I’ll tell you what. She hasn’t seen little Austin, has she?’

Jason shook his head.

‘So why don’t we take him with us after dinner. She loves cats, and with her legs as they are, she can no longer look after one, not like Aunt Beryl. That woman’s got too many cats, if you ask me.’

Jason was worried that Austin wouldn’t be too keen on the idea. As he attempted to put the cat in his carrying cage he thought Austin might get cold feet, as if he was being taken to the vet again. However, Austin was being quite accommodating this time. Perhaps he knew vets weren’t open at this time of night. He got into his cage, settled down, head alert as if intrigued as to where he was being taken. Jason was also warming to the idea.

On the way in the car, his parents were asking how he was getting on with the new class. He simply answered ‘Fine’ as he hadn’t made up his mind yet. He was also thinking about telling them how he couldn’t get on with the new head teacher, but kept it to himself. Ridding-Ridicott might not be too bad if he stayed on Jason’s good side. Not that he had a bad side, it was just that he didn’t think he should have to take any nonsense from anybody, and he could, if provoked, do something about it, just as he had done with Cavanagh who, allegedly as he found out today, had been transferred to another school. So that was another problem out of the way. (It was discovered during the holiday the money Cavanagh raised over Christmas was obtained by means of extortion and coercion, with donators being forced to donate. Once one of them complained about being treated in such an unacceptable way, the rest later likewise complained, and not only was he forced to relocate to a different catchment area, he was also stripped of his medal.) Serves him right. But as one problem departs, another arrives, maybe, he thought, thinking of Ridding-Ridicott.

His parents were delighted to learn their son’s next exhibition was

going to be held at one of the most prestigious galleries in the West End, not the best, but certainly way better than the one at the Town Hall.

They say you can choose your friends but you can't choose your relatives. This was certainly true in the case of Granny. Not only did she have bad legs, she also had bad ears and was as deaf as a post sometimes. The only person she seemed to understand was Jason's mother. So Jason asked her to speak to Gran on his behalf, otherwise he would only have to keep repeating himself or end up having to shout.

Gran barely made it to the front door to let them in. She knew they were coming as his mother had already phoned ahead of the visit, but she still apologised for the mess politely, although there was no need to do so. The house was immaculate as usual since Gran had a cleaner come in twice a week. She also had a carer come in four times a week to look after her, a driver to take her into town, and yet still complained she didn't see anybody weeks on end.

'How you doing, my love?' she squeaked at Jason, rubbing his hair like he was still five years old.

He was probably that age the last time he came round to see Gran. She hadn't changed!

They were invited into the front room, all red upholstery, with the same familiar smell he remembered. Was it lavender? He never could place it. They were asked to sit down. Mother made polite conversation. The usual things; how are you doing, have you been looking after yourself, etc., whilst Jason got out his cat.

'Oh, isn't he lovely,' Gran purred.

Austin was very friendly towards her and didn't mind the woman stroking him. He even sat on her lap, quite content at being the centre of attention.

'What's his name?' Gran enquired.

'It's Austin,' Jason answered, forgetting to speak up.

'Steven?' she asked, confused.

But his mother helped him out. 'No, Gran. AUST-TIN.'

'Austin. That's an unusual name for a cat. But isn't he lovely,' she purred again, stroking Austin who was now quite happily stretched out on her lap.

Impatient as ever, Jason nudged his mum to ask her about the picture.

'Shush,' she reprimanded him and waited for the right moment when Gran would be listening.

'Gran,' she started to ask in a very slow voice, emphasising the syllables, 'you know that old painting you have got in your back room?'

'My back what?'

'ROOM!' they all shouted.

‘What painting?’ she asked them, confused.

‘The one on the wall that Uncle Harry gave you when he came back from South Africa in the Sixties,’ his mother continued. Even she was struggling to get through. Gran hadn’t a clue what she was talking about. ‘You know, the one of the girl with the blue skin,’ she persevered. Still Gran didn’t know.

‘Shall I go and get it, Mum?’ Jason asked, seeing she was getting nowhere.

‘I think you’d better, dear, otherwise we’ll be here all night.’

His father, who so far, hadn’t said a word, just sat there staring as Jason rushed out. The boy disappeared for about five seconds, and then rushed back in, distraught.

‘It’s not there!’ he moaned.

‘Let me go and have a look, son,’ his father offered.

Gran still hadn’t a clue what they were on about.

‘He’s right,’ his father said. ‘It’s not there. Looks like she’s had the back room redecorated since the last time we were here.’

Mother, realising it was going to take a bit more effort than she was willing to expend, eventually got Gran to remember, who told them it was now up in the attic. Dad offered to go and fetch it. A few minutes later he returned with said item, all covered in dust, and had to blow the cobwebs off it.

‘Oh, that old thing,’ Gran groaned. ‘Never did like it. Harry brought that back from South Africa for me in the Sixties. Did you know that?’

‘YES,’ they all nodded.

‘Jason was wondering if he could borrow it for awhile,’ his mother uttered, emphasising each syllable. ‘He’s doing a project at school. So would it be all right if he borrowed it?’

‘Borrow it?’ she struggled to hear.

‘Yes, borrow it.’

‘Borrow it? He can have it. I never did like it. Harry brought that back from South Africa for me ...’

‘In the Sixties!’ They all finished the sentence off for her.

‘Are you sure?’ his mother asked her for confirmation.

‘Oh, yes. Never did like it. Harry brought ...’

‘Yes, well that’s very nice of you,’ his mother interrupted, not wishing to hear that sentence ever again.

‘What’s he want it for anyway?’ Gran squeaked.

‘He’s doing a project for his art class. Isn’t that right, Jason?’ she asked her son, nudging him, trying to get the boy to say something to Gran so she wouldn’t have to.

‘I’m going to do my version of it,’ he shouted. ‘I’m going to paint it.’

‘You’re going to paint Austin?’

‘No, Gran,’ he moaned. He was about to lose his patience as well. ‘I’m going to paint her,’ he shouted again, pointing at the *Chinese Girl*.

‘Oh, why don’t you paint Austin instead? He’s just as beautiful as her,’ she said, stroking the cat.

Then it clicked, hitting him like a ton of bricks. Of course, that’s what he was going to do. He was going to paint Austin as the *Chinese Girl*!

‘What a great idea,’ he rejoiced to himself, rather than anyone else in the room.

His parents just looked at each other with quizzical expressions.

He could see it all now, Austin wearing the same outfit, her head replaced by his, with the same look, the eyes glancing downwards, whilst still retaining the Chinese features, and Austin’s fur a deep shade of blue like her face.

He was so busy thinking about his inspiration, he wasn’t even aware they were walking out of the house and heading back to the car. He didn’t even hear his mother say, ‘Thank God that’s over and done with. I never thought we’d get out of there.’ Or even notice she was looking at him as if it was all his fault.

But Jason didn’t care. He was happy. He knew exactly what he was going to do next.

Chapter Eighteen

‘What would Spare do?’ Jason asked himself. How would he go about transforming this woman’s face into that of the cat?

He had it all set up; a piece of canvas his dad bought for him (measuring exactly the same size as the original painting) on his easel, Tretchikoff’s painting hanging on the wall before him opposite his bed so the first thing he saw in the morning when he woke up was her face, which he has been doing now for the past few weeks, about three or four good sketches of Austin looking slightly to the left, his eyes downcast, and about a dozen failed attempts in the bin so far.

Either the cat’s head didn’t look right, or it was too small, or it was too big, or he couldn’t get the right angle to line up with her eyes to be convincing enough as a substitute, and it ended up looking pathetic rather than awe-inspiring.

It didn’t seem to be coming out. All he had to do was sketch it in roughly take it to school on Monday for the next art lesson, and use the oils there to finish off the rest. But the base sketch had to be right first.

He needed help. A little booster should do the trick.

‘I DESIRE THE HELP OF MY CATS,’ as Spare may have put it. He took his desire with him, got on his bike and rode as hard and as fast as he could to the park where there wouldn’t be anything like cats to remind him of his desire. He charged it and dropped it, throwing his scribbled note away, banishing the whole thing from his mind.

Here in the park there was only dogs being taken for a walk, ducks wading in the pond, trees growing, grass blowing in the late autumnal

day, with only the occasional cloud rolling by overhead. And there was just enough sunshine to help keep it warm: it was perfect. He could stay here all afternoon.

The first part of the term had gone by quickly. Already six weeks had passed and he was into a half-term. The experiments he carried out in the sciences classes had gone smoothly, proving he could back up his theoretical knowledge by applying it to the practical side. His grades were exceptional as well. Ridding-Ridicott was leaving him alone, no longer picking on him. So what was there to worry about? If only he could remember. He couldn't even remember why he went to the park, his mind being a complete blank.

It must be getting late now, he thought, as he lay there on the lush grass watching the leaves, which had once been so full of life, now turning a dry amber, some verging on a dull russet. They were detaching themselves from their branches and hitching a ride on the soft, gentle breeze. He watched them flutter, gracefully whirl around then slowly descend to the ground and flutter again amongst the other dead leaves. Then he thought of Newton, apples and gravity, the weight and mass of an object, and all the other problems he had solved in the physics lessons. No equation could match the beauty of nature.

Hearing the local church bell reminded him it was time to go home. He got on his bike and rode at a reasonable pace, deciding he was going to take the long route back, to cut through the top end of the park. As he came over the brow of a hill he could see a tall pole sticking up into the sky, a huge red canvas beneath it, and hear the sound of people cheering and clapping: the circus was back in town. He didn't even know anything about it, hadn't seen any posters anywhere advertising it—the usual Russian one with tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, and clowns—which was obviously on tour, and stopping off here for the kids' holidays.

He thought he would check it out from the outside as he had no money to go in, just to see what was happening. The last time he went to the circus must have been when he was about six. He won a prize, a big teddy bear, but forgot to collect it after the show. A pity, because at that age he would have been so proud of it.

The circus sounded like it was in full swing. As he got closer, he could see all the lorries, caravans, and the big loader for carrying the tent, and came round to a freshly made path that would take him to the other side of the tent where they kept all the animals in the cages. He could hear them as he approached: the neighing of horses, the growling of a bear, the trumpet call of an elephant, then as he came round to the other end where they lead them in, Jason got the shock of his life. It was a huge tiger on a chain, its owner trying to get the thing to go back in its

cage, oblivious of the boy. Jason screeched to a halt on his bike, the sound of his brakes piercing the early evening air. Suddenly the tiger turned round and roared, locking eyes with Jason. He was transfixed, lost in that moment as if there was no Jason, no circus, no park, just the tiger.

‘You go,’ he could hear some man shouting in a thick accent. ‘You not to be here. Go,’ it came through again, bringing him back to his senses. The man with the tiger was shooing him away, telling him to go, that it was dangerous to be here. Then it all came flooding back, why he was here, why he came to the park, and his desire. He asked for help and he got it. There it was right in front of him and that’s what he was going to draw when he got home.

He turned his bike round and rode like the devil was on his tail. He could see tigers everywhere, their eyes in the light bulbs of the shop windows, stripes in every zigzag pattern he came across, shadows of the buses creating silhouettes of huge feline creatures stealthily running alongside him, as if he was overwhelmed by images of large cats.

As soon as he got home he wasted no time heading up to his room. The canvas of the *Chinese Girl* was going to have to wait. He told Old Rennie awhile ago he was struggling with it and that he would have to be patient. His mind was now full of another feline.

He got out his big roll of paper from under the bed, cut off a sheet, and grabbed a pencil. He lay down on his stomach, put the pencil in the middle of the paper and closed his eyes. Up popped the tiger; its eyes were now his. It was if the creature was inside him trying to get out through his drawing hand. He could feel it making large arcs, circles, skipping over the paper, crossing back again, then circling round in ever tightening circles where the eyes would be, then down where its paws were, back up again, forming a loop for the tail. And so it went on, endlessly pouring out of him until the energy was spent and he could finally fall asleep.

His mother found him in the morning sprawled on the floor, still clutching the pencil in his hand, with a large drawing under him.

She gently coaxed him awake, thinking he maybe a somnambulist, knowing it would possibly put him in shock if awoken too abruptly.

‘What happened to you last night?’ she asked in a concerned voice.

Jason looked around trying to remember where he was, quite forgetting he made it home yesterday, and recalled how he felt, pumped up on energy, as if the spirit of the tiger was in his legs, in his bike, in his wheels. He felt he could have cycled to the moon and back, he had that much energy at his disposal.

‘We didn’t know what you were doing,’ she continued. ‘But we thought we’d better leave you alone as we know you’ve been struggling

with your painting.'

She got up to have a look at the canvas. 'Oh, Jason. You've not even touched it!'

Then he remembered his drawing. It was there right in front of him. He picked it up and took it over to the easel and placed it over the *Chinese Girl*.

'No, Mum, I did this instead.'



They both stood back to look at his inspired piece of work, their heads like puppets lolling to the side. Even Austin, who had fallen asleep on the unused bed, woke up and had a good look at the picture, craning his head to one side to make out what it was. It was magnificent, Jason thought. Each line seemed to vibrate with energy. The whole thing gave off a vibe, a resonance of some indescribable quality, with the viewer's eyes automatically drawn to those of the tiger's as it stared back in resolute silent. It was raw, undigested, undiluted power, but controlled, a single line with neither beginning nor end, and drawn with a pencil that never left the page until he fell asleep. Spare would have been proud.

'Yes, very nice, dear,' was all she could say.

Nice! His mother had no appreciation of art. It was perfect. Didn't she know it was not drawn with lead in his pencil, but blood, his very own life-force?

'Come on, your breakfast is ready,' she nagged him.

He couldn't wait to be older so he could leave home.

After breakfast he took Austin outside, just to take his mind off things. He played with him, but it wasn't the same as how it used to be when he was younger. Austin tended to be more passive and docile these days, less fun, although he would often go for a wander, sometimes not be seen for hours, and then drift home again, climb in through Jason's bedroom window at night and curl up beside him. What did he do on those nocturnal excursions, Jason wondered. Probably seeking female companionship. He didn't blame him. Austin was a good-looking male cat. If Jason was a female cat, he'd fancy him!

He stopped, looked up, and shook his head. Of course, that's where he was going wrong. He was drawing Austin as a male cat. All he had to do was to make Austin look female so it would coincide with the face of the *Chinese Girl*.

He hung up a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on his door and got to work. He made Austin sit up on his bed and tried to work out what Austin would look like as a female rather than a male. Is there really any difference apart from their respective organs? Could you tell the sex of a cat apart from looking down there? It didn't matter. It was him knowing Austin was male that was ruining the picture. All he had to do was change Austin's sex in his head and make him appear more feminine.

He picked up his sketch pad, positioned his chair at an angle to the bed, and started drawing Austin who was now looking at him rather bemused as if to say, 'Now what are you playing at?'

It was just a matter of getting the curvature of the face right. Jason would call out to Austin as soon as the cat started to look away. He really had no patience as a sitter and looked like he was going to jump off the bed any minute. Jason would have to stop him and regain his attention occasionally, trying to get him to look in the right direction.

He figured he had the shape of the face right, by extending it slightly and making it more narrow. Every so often Jason's eyes would divert to the *Chinese Girl* and back again, superimposing her facial structure over his rough sketch, then removing it so he could make a better impression. Although the girl's eye didn't look Chinese much—she was said to be of a racial mixture, a Eurasian—Jason emphasised the eyes more, making them slanted and slightly pointed, but still looking down.

He propped his finished sketch on the easel and stood back. Did it look right? Was it convincing? He thought so. It could even be thought of as a Chinese cat now since it had distinctly oriental features. He glanced over to where Austin was. The cat, evidently bored by now, had fallen asleep. No matter, Jason was happy that he finally got it right.

All he had to do now was to transfer his sketch to the canvas, making sure the head was the right size. Either too big or too small and it

wouldn't work; it would look unconvincing, if not laughable.

He spent the rest of the afternoon sketching it in, rubbing out the odd line here and there, emphasising other lines until he got the shape of the head right. When he thought he had at last finished, he stood back and nodded. That was it. That was right. It worked. Perfect.

Fortunately, the first lesson the next day was going to be art. He could start painting it using their oils. It was a shame it had to be oils—Jason had no patience for them as they took too long to dry—but as the original was in oil so this version had to be. His many attempts with oil had failed. He just didn't seem to get on with that medium, and would rather have used pastels or gouache than oil, but it would not be the same, and he would not be able to get the same colouration unless he used them.

Chapter Nineteen

After winning the approval of his parents, having spent the rest of the evening trying to convince them that what he was doing was right, and that it would work, he proudly took his canvas to school, wondering what Old Rennie would think of his idea. He couldn't wait to see the expression on his face when he showed it to him. He had already given it a name, *Chinese Cat*, and reckoned it should only take him about six or seven sessions to complete it so that it would be ready just in time for his exhibition. He also had his eye on a suitable gold frame from the market-place. It was old, from about the same era, and resembled pretty closely the frame of the original he had seen in the photos. The only problem was the price. The market-seller was asking £30 for it, way beyond the means of his paltry pocket-money. He would have to beg his dad to buy it for him, probably as an early Christmas present.

Mr Rennie's reaction when Jason unwrapped the canvas could be summed up in one word: horrified. He stared at the sketch without making a sound, as if incredulous, refusing to take in what he saw. Aghast would be another word. Jason waited in silence, his attention on the man's face hoping he would at least say something. He had never known Old Rennie to be lost for words before. But his expression said it all. It was quite clear he did not approve.

The silence was deafening. The rest of the class just stared at the teacher not making a sound. It was as if the whole world was hanging in the balance waiting for one syllable to pass his lips, or the expectation the Romans must have had in the arenas when a gladiator's sword was poised over the neck of his opponent waiting for the emperor to give the signal, a thumb up or a thumb down.

But Mr Rennie didn't say anything. He simply shook his head and walked away. The rest of the class, intrigued, made their way to the front and gathered round the teacher's desk to see what young Jones had brought in to the class to make Old Rennie so lost for words.

They all started sniggering at first. Then it turned into laughter and mocking with everyone looking at Jason as if he was mad. Surely he cannot be serious? 'Why not? Of course I'm bloody serious!' he wanted to scream.

'Silence!' Mr Rennie's voice could have split the foundations of the school in half. All the boys were told to go back to their seats and to be quiet, including Jason.

'I'll speak to you afterwards,' he grumbled, giving Jason a stern look.

Oh, dear, Jason thought. He really doesn't like it. How was he going to win his approval, and get back the confidence he placed in his star pupil?

They were told to continue their projects (a new one had been set as all the other boys had finished the previous one, except Jason who was now lagging behind) whilst Mr Rennie took to his seat and stared into space for the remainder of the lesson.

Poor Jason, he thought he could win the teacher over. Obviously not. And what was the man going to say to him afterwards? Give him a good berating?

Jason ignored the non-believer and started on his sketch. Perhaps Mr Rennie was right. It wouldn't work. But now it just had to. It had to work. It was no good doubting his own convictions. As soon as he started doing that he knew he was going to be in trouble. He needed to get back his faith in himself. It had been all but demolished, lying there shattered on the floor in pieces. 'Come on, pull yourself together,' he was telling himself. 'Prove them all wrong.'

As soon as he put paintbrush to canvas, the rest of the class then disappeared into the recesses of his mind. He no longer cared what they or Old Rennie thought. His one consolation was exactly what the man had said earlier: 'The critics abhorred it. The public adored it.' And who are these art critics anyway? What do they know about art? It was the same with films. If you read a critic's review of a film where he trashed it, the film would turn out to be surprisingly good, and the public loved it. He wanted to distrust all critics from now on. If Tretchikoff could shift thousands of copies because the public liked it and had faith in his work, then so could he—if he got it right—and all he needed to do was restore his own faith in himself and in his own conviction.

It was no simple task, though. He accepted that. Oil was not his favourite medium, and if he remembered rightly, Spare didn't use it

much either. He could understand why. Spare was a fast artist. He could dash off a sketch in a flash and rarely spent more than a few hours on any work he produced. Oils were too slow for his liking, and the same for Jason. He felt the same way. And having set himself this task it was like he was working against the grain, or trying to lift a massive weight with a pulley system that was totally inadequate.

Be patient, he kept telling himself. If he rushed it he would ruin it.

He worked on the background first which was fairly plain, a simple brown that relied on the texture of the canvas to give it a pattern. Then the outline of the woman-cat. The major problem here was that Austin did not have a full set of rich black hair which curled before hitting his shoulders and round the back of his neck, like she did. He would have to leave that out and give the woman-cat a slimmer profile which would expose slightly more of the background than the original (which, by the way, was now photographically stored in his memory—he didn't need a copy in front of him).

No sooner had he started, it was time to finish. It took him two hours just to paint the background. He could have carried on all day and hated to be interrupted in mid-flow. He reluctantly put down his brush and moved his wet canvas to the side out of harm's way. The rest of the class simply giggled like silly little girls. 'I'll show them,' he said to himself, 'if it's the last thing I do.'

Now he was going to see Mr Rennie in private. For once, this was not something he was looking forward to.

'Do you mean to tell me,' he started barking at the poor boy, 'that you have spent the past six weeks wasting your time on that miserable creation?'

'No, sir. I've done other things as well. Lots of them, in fact.'

'I should hope so too. I cannot believe you are really serious about wasting more time on that ...' he grumbled, pointing at the painting, unable to get the last word out. Anger obviously got the better of him.

'Why, sir? You said we could choose any painting from any genre.'

'I was talking about art. Real art. Not namby-pamby stuff.'

The two of them went quiet waiting for the dust to settle. When it had Old Rennie opened his mouth and said with all sincerity: 'I appreciate you are only a young boy. But you need to take yourself and your future more seriously. Think very clearly about what you are doing at present.'

'I understand, sir. And I am doing just that.'

'I hope you are, my lad. Now, you say you've done more works?'

'Yes, sir. Some more charcoals, pastels and pencil drawings.'

'Good. I suggest you bring them in tomorrow. Your exhibition is in six weeks time and we still have plenty of preparation ahead of us. Here,'

he said, handing him a pile, 'are the brochures. Now, they hopefully should be a good indication of your work so far. We've sent copies round to all the other galleries as well in the hope of drumming up some more interest. But we need to sort out the actual selection of the others so we can see how many we can fit into the gallery. Now, which one do you think should form the centre piece of the exhibition?' he asked the boy flicking through the pages, eyeing each one of the photos in the brochure.

'That one,' he said, pointing at his canvas.

Mr Rennie took his eyes off the photos and looked up confused, unsure which one he meant. When he saw what he was pointing at, he gulped.

'You must be joking! Surely you're not thinking of including that?'

'Why not, sir?'

'Because it's a joke, my lad. A bloody joke!'

But Jason just smiled. Old Rennie could tell he was being serious. He had to resign himself to the fact the boy's mind was made up and no amount of persuasion would change it.

'Very well. If you insist,' he groaned, far from happy with the boy.

'Can I take a brochure?'

'Of course. They are yours.'

'Good, because I want to show it to my parents. I think I've done them proud.'

'You won't do if you exhibit that thing,' he retorted, pointing at the canvas. 'Now run along, my lad, or you'll miss your next lesson.'

When he got home he ran into the kitchen to show his mother the brochure.

'Very nice, dear.' ('Nice' appeared to be her favourite word.) 'Your father will be pleased,' she continued, browsing through the brochure, and nodding.

'I hope so, because I want to ask him a favour.'

'Oh no, not another one. What is it this time?' she asked, cautiously.

'If I can have my Christmas present in advance.'

'Why, dear?'

'Because I've seen this excellent frame in the market and it looks just like the one on Tretchikoff's painting. It's gold with a black strip.'

'And how much do they want for it?'

'It's only £30 and I need it for my painting for the exhibition.'

'I see. Did you show your version to Mr Rennie?' The boy nodded. 'And what did he say?' she asked.

Jason soon lost his excitement and looked down. 'He didn't like it.'

'I see. Why?'

He didn't answer straight away. It was like an interrogation with his

mother trying to extract a full confession.

‘He said it was a joke.’

‘Well, what does he know. That funny man. It’s what you think that counts. You prove him wrong. Do you hear?’

The boy nodded and perked up. ‘Does that mean I can have the frame, Mum?’

‘Let me speak to your father about it. He should be home early this evening. I will ask him when he’s in a good mood.’

Just as she said that, they could hear the front door open and being slammed shut. Then they heard: ‘Damned traffic. I swear it gets worse every day!’

‘Which isn’t now,’ she whispered to him. ‘Run along upstairs and do some homework.’

She kissed him and watched him skip upstairs waving to his dad on the way up.

‘Hello, son,’ he greeted the boy and made his way to the kitchen to speak to his wife. ‘Do you know it took me half an hour to cross the bridge this evening?’

‘Hello, dear. Have you had a nice day?’

‘Terrible,’ he muttered and kissed her on the cheek. ‘What’s this?’ he asked her picking up the brochure.

‘It’s your son’s work,’ she replied, as if it couldn’t be more obvious.

‘My son,’ he mumbled to himself, and started flicking through the pages, with a smile creeping across his face. ‘My son,’ he repeated.

‘Yes, your son,’ she mocked.

‘Well, it’s not exactly accountancy, is it?’

‘No, but he has been showing considerable talent in art, and I think you should be proud of him.’

‘I am. It’s just that I see no practical use in art. What do artists do all day anyway? They sit around musing, talking philosophically about unreal and impractical things. They think they are inspired by finding some mundane object, then take it out of context, put into some other context, sign it, give it some pretentious name and call it art.’

‘Your son doesn’t do that. He draws and paints, and he does it very well. He’s only twelve remember, and you need to give him a bit more encouragement.’

‘Oh, very well,’ he sighed as if the dream of his son becoming like him were now dissipating into the past. ‘And this exhibition is being held at Le Palais over Christmas?’

‘Yes, and Jason has some really good work on display. It could make him a fortune if it does well by leading to all sorts of commissioned work, you know.’

‘I know.’

‘So? Are you happy now?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Good, because Jason has his eye on a frame in the market which he wants for his painting, and I thought we could give it to him as a present.’

‘I see. And how much is this going to cost me?’

‘It’s only £30. If you talk to the man nicely, he may even reduce it.’

‘Okay. I will have a word with him on Saturday.’

Just then Jason rushed into the kitchen, flung his arms round his dad, and said: ‘Thanks, Dad.’

His mother bent down towards him and said: ‘You were listening,’ then laughed.

Chapter Twenty

At school the next day, Jason did as he was asked. He brought all the pieces he worked on over the past few weeks to show Mr Rennie, leaving what he considered his best till last, his drawing of the tiger which he entitled, *The Power of My Tiger*. Jason scrawled the name in the bottom left-hand corner in one continuous line in pencil.

All he could hear was superlatives; ‘Excellent, superb, splendid,’ etc., and watched Mr Rennie nodding his head up and down, as he was sifting through them, going through each one, trying to decide which was the best. When he came to the tiger drawing Mr Rennie stopped, stood erect and held it up and looked to the boy and said: ‘This is pure Spare. Excellent.’

He gathered all of them together and started organising them by size.

‘Which ones are we going to show?’ he asked his mentor.

‘All of them, my lad. All of them.’

‘Do you think there’s enough room for them, I mean, with the others as well?’

‘I don’t see why not. If we arrange them carefully, we should be able to fit them in.’

‘Including that one?’ he asked pointing at the barely started canvas.

Mr Rennie gave him a funny look. All he could do was grunt.

The picture was obviously a thorn in his side. Young Jason insisted it be included once it was finished. His dad was going to buy a frame for it, and the whole thing should look exactly the same as the original, with one exception, of course.

‘Well, you’d better get on and finish it then, hadn’t you,’ he snarled.

‘Yes, sir.’

Jason was about to do just that, to go back and join the rest of the class, when Old Rennie tapped him on the shoulder and beckoned him to follow him outside the classroom and into the corridor.

‘What is it, sir?’ he asked, intrigued as to what he was going to say.

‘They tell me’ (‘they’ again—who are these people?) ‘that you have been doing exceptionally well this year so far.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘And that you have mastered all three science classes beautifully, even the practical side of things. Now, I’m no fool, but when I hear a young boy like yourself is, shall we say, over-achieving, well above his age, it doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together and figure out he has been dabbling again.’

‘I wouldn’t call it that, sir. Just some boosting to get the old brain cells working. I mean, it’s not as if I’m cheating, is it?’

‘Call it what you will, but you’ve practically finished your school year well ahead of the other boys, getting excellent marks all round.’

‘Thank you, sir. Mr Ridicott did mention the same thing to me this morning.’

‘I understand there was some antagonism between the two of you when he first started here.’

‘Not any more, sir. I think he understands me well enough now. And we’ve patched up our mutual differences.’

‘You really are a remarkable young lad.’

‘Thank you, sir. Can I get back to class now?’

‘By all means.’

Yes, it was true. Ridding-Ridicott had mellowed out and come round to his way of thinking. He stopped testing the boy and ceased making him stand up at the front of the class asking him stupid questions in an effort to make him look small. He was no longer an issue.

There were some suggestions from Mr Rennie that Jason had been up to his old tricks, using his magic against Mr Ridicott, but these were without foundation, groundless, and pure speculation on his part. Jason had done nothing of the sort. He merely kept himself to himself and did little to exacerbate the situation, keeping a low profile as much as possible and got his head down. (Besides, he would never stoop that low unless it was absolutely necessary, of course.)

Jason proved in his written exercises and his homework that he knew his subjects and was well beyond the scope or level required of his years. In fact, he was leaving all the other boys behind; the class couldn’t keep up with him. ‘They,’ presumably the other teachers, had apparently been talking about him quite a bit as he heard rumours of him being propelled to the next year already, and will definitely be promoted a year above his

year at the start of the following academic term, should he do well in the placement exams in January.

He wasn't even thinking about it. Next year didn't even exist. He just wanted to get to the end of this term, get to the exhibition and see what everyone thought of the picture he was currently working on.

It may be no Van Gogh, nor a Renoir, nor a Gauguin, but it certainly had something special about it, what the French call 'Je ne sais quoi,' something indescribable. And it was coming along nicely. Over the next few weeks he was adding more and more to it; more colour, more detail, trying to get the top of her tunic to look right (a pale gold, bordering on yellow), with its distinctive pattern and coloured shapes. The rest of the tunic would not present much of a problem as it was no different from the background, not shaded in at all, merely a few crude lines suggesting the rest of it as if it was somehow invisible.

He saved the head till last. This was going to be a problem. Although it looked fine as a sketch, it was a far different matter when it came to painting it in. For one thing, the colour had to be just right. The original facial tone was a bluish-green, much lighter than he would have wished. He would have preferred it to have been slightly darker so he could blend in the black of Austin's fur more naturally. After several false starts, he decided the only way to get round it was to make the whole face slightly darker, allowing him to make a natural progression towards the back of the head, so that the back was dark black, and the front was a blue bordering on black as if a blue spot-light was shining on the black fur.

He then had the problem of getting the eyes right. Luckily her eyes didn't look too much different from a cat, if you imagined Austin's eyes half-closed like two thin slits. He decided to retain the blue iris colour and used a deep rich black for the pupils.

The mouth was quite full in the original, a deep red. Cats have hardly any lips, but he thought it best to retain the red of her lips and give Austin very thin ones, more like two lines, with a slight hint of whiskers either side, and a snub little nose above.

By the time he finished, he estimated it took him over sixty hours, spread across 15 sessions of 2 to 3 hours each. But when he could finally stand back to view it as a whole, wiping the excess paint off his fingers and brushes, he knew it had been worth it. The thing worked. The head was just the right size, its angle was perfect, the glancing eyes matched exactly, as did the top of the tunic. He was thrilled to bits. And to think it was his first proper attempt at using oils as well, only made the exercise that much more impressive.

All he needed to do now was sign it in the bottom right-hand corner, varnish it, and then get it framed using the one his dad so generously

donated to the cause.

Mr Rennie had been absent for most of their sessions and basically left them to it. He was taking pieces of Jason's work down to the gallery, a few at a time, and trying to negotiate the amount of space available. All that was wanting now was the final piece, his *pièce de résistance*.

'My God,' the teacher stammered, now seeing it in its entirety.

'What do you think, sir?' the boy asked, not really expecting a critical or a reasonable response.

'So that's it, is it?'

'Yes, sir. All it needs is the frame to finish it off. Don't you like it?' the boy smirked.

Old Rennie could do nothing but huff as if it was beneath the boy's ability, and will have heaps of scorn thrown upon it, like Ruskin's comment about Whistler's painting *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* when it went on display at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877.

But little Jason doubted if he would be suing anyone for libel over any comments made about his painting, *Chinese Cat*. Hopefully they will see it for what it was, not a joke, but perhaps more a satirical swipe at popular culture, and he thought it would be interesting to see if it garnered such a positive response that it could possibly be put up for sale, perhaps in an auction in the future.

Unlike the other pieces of work, which had been put into temporary frames (merely a sheet of glass and strong board with detachable clips), this one was going to be properly framed. He was allowed to take it home once the varnish dried and his dad took it down to the local picture framer and asked him to do a professional job using the frame Jason wanted, bought at the market. Although he was charged a tenner for the service, his dad didn't quibble and even asked his son if he could buy the whole thing after the exhibition. It was the first time anyone had actually offered money for one of his paintings. He was just praying there would be more offers to follow, and not piddling amounts either. He told his dad he would think about it and returned the now framed picture back to Old Rennie just in time for the exhibition the next day.

Now, that should be interesting, he thought.

Chapter Twenty-One

The weeks went so quickly Jason couldn't believe it was already time for the exhibition. He was working so hard towards his show the time seemed to flash by. Walking into the gallery before it officially opened, and seeing all his exhibits hung up under perfect lighting, but perhaps a little too crammed together (Old Rennie did say space was running short) and seeing his name in print on the window outside, made him feel now finally he was getting somewhere. Perhaps he would now be accepted as the artist as he was, not so much a struggling one, but a burgeoning one, with many more pictures in him than he would ever have time to execute, probably.

He walked around just browsing, making sure they were all there, all in their glory, each one in its right place, and stood at the centre of the room to face the main exhibit. Seeing it up there on the wall made it less trivial and more real, like a proper work of art. It was the first thing people would see as soon as they walked in to the main room which was devoted to all his coloured works. The pencil drawings and charcoals were in the two rooms to either side. He wasn't quite happy about that arrangement as he would have preferred the tiger picture to be in the main room.

He checked it out. At least it was near the centre of the long wall. Unfortunately, to get it in the centre they had to put it between two pillars supporting the landing to the upper floor, closed for this exhibition and undergoing refurbishment. It may be a good thing, he thought, as it forced the viewer to stand right in front of it between the pillars, thus probably giving it a bigger impact. Standing there looking at it, he could not deny it was as powerful as ever. Not only was he inspired to draw it,

he also felt he and the tiger were one, especially that day when they locked eyes at the circus. And seeing his eyes now there was still the same sensation when they first met, that the eyes were pulling him in, not into the real thing this time, but into the drawing itself.

His parents, who had been busy trying to find somewhere to park the car, found their son lost in thought. He didn't even hear them come up behind him, being so transfixed by his creation.

'I'll buy that one as well,' his father joked.

But Jason doubted if he would ever sell it. The thing had too many meanings for him, not just a sentimental value, but a deep connection that no one else could ever have.

'Well, come on, son,' his father urged him. 'Show us around.'

He took his parents into the main room to find Mr Rennie had turned up. He introduced them. His mother (Jason forgot) had already met his art teacher at a PTA meeting the first month Jason started attending Summerby. This time she seemed to be more accommodating to the man, probably for the boy's benefit.

After some small talk, Mr Rennie joked: 'I see you haven't brought your cat with you this time.'

'Jason wanted to,' his mother chipped in, 'but they wouldn't allow cats in here. Only dogs for the blind are allowed.'

Why a blind person would want to attend a gallery full of paintings Jason could never comprehend.

'Pity,' Mr Rennie continued 'I was half-expecting a certain person to turn up today then you could set Austin on him,' he joked again.

'You mean ...' Jason started.

'You know very well who I mean.'

'You mean that funny man,' his mother butted in.

'Yes,' Old Rennie resumed. 'But he will be along sometime, if not today then tomorrow or the day after. This exhibition has been so well advertised everyone knows about it, including him, no doubt.'

It was now show-time. The proprietor suggested Jason moved to the front by the doors to welcome the guests as soon as they came in. Two lovely young ladies wearing traditional French waitress outfits (in keeping with the name of the gallery) appeared from the back room carrying silver trays full of glasses of champagne. Immediately the big clock struck midday, the doors opened and the guests arrived, perhaps not as many as Jason wished but certainly more than a few handfuls.

'They're probably here for the free champagne,' his father joked to his mother.

She nudged him in the ribs and told him to keep quiet. She watched her son shake hands with each one of them, very courteously. Some old

woman called him 'Justin' by mistake, but he was too busy being caught up in the moment he didn't even notice, and probably didn't care about such trivial things as names. After all, this was his first public engagement and he was understandably nervous. His palms were sweating, his mouth was drying up, and he was glad to greet the last of the first rush, asking his mother if he could have a glass of champers as he needed it. But his mother refused, reminding him of his age, but promised he could have one at home at Christmas which was only a few days away.

She reminded his dad that the car was in a limited parking zone and made their excuses to leave, with poor Jason left to deal with the onslaught of questions from the prying guests all by himself. One of them turned out to be the journalist from the Town Hall, Trotter, as he liked to be called, who was asking Jason some pretty serious questions this time, to which he replied the best he could. His photographer friend had come along as well, but was disappointed to find Jason hadn't got his cat with him, to which the boy explained why and apologised.



Again he was asked to pose. Jason suggested in front of his canvas which had drawn a small crowd. As the people moved back so a photo could be taken, he could hear them say things like, 'What a beautiful cat. But why is he wearing that funny coat?' and quite clearly not getting it. 'Hadrn't they seen the original upon which it was based? I'm mean, what is the point of satire if you don't get it?' he wanted to shout out to them.

After the photo Trotter told him it should be in the paper soon, if not tomorrow, certainly before Christmas.

Another man came up to him who was distinctly foreign-looking and said 'Tretchikoff!' in a thick accent as if he was swearing in Russian. He laughed heartily afterwards and patted Jason so hard on the back he thought he had broken a rib, then walked off.

By mid-afternoon there was still no sign of Eckenstein. Jason was most disappointed. He was sure, along with Austin and Old Rennie, his rival would put in an appearance just to check out the competition again. Or did he think Jason's work was unlike Spare's and therefore was not worth the effort to inspect it, that it was beneath him?

Who cares about the silly man, anyway, Jason thought. He was probably quite harmless and best forgotten.

After another brief interview with a journalist from a different paper, and more unanswerable questions, Jason decided it was time to leave. He had had enough, and would rather not be there, letting the work speak for itself instead. It was like having an interpreter on hand in an interview where everyone is speaking the same language—absolutely unnecessary!

At home he was greeted by a surprise glass of champagne from his parents who said they couldn't resist buying some to celebrate his success. He was only allowed one glass, mind, and was not to tell a soul about it. But judging by the both of them, they already had more than a glass, probably several since there were at least two empty bottles in the kitchen. And after dinner he was permitted another glass and sat down to watch TV with them. School was finished. Dad was now off work for two weeks. Jason had done more than what was required of him for a whole year. It was time to take it easy. He didn't particular like drinking champagne, it was a bit too fizzy, but as adults drunk it all the time, apparently, he thought he'd better get some practice in and understand what it was about this drink that made it so appealing, and requested another glass, which was granted, and was told no more after that, then off to bed.

In the morning he was rudely awakened by his mother. He was still groggy from the champers and couldn't even remember going to bed.

'Come on, Jason,' she nagged him. 'Wake up. It's Mr Rennie on the phone. He says it's urgent.'

Jason clambered out of bed in his pyjamas. His mother helped him put his robe on as he couldn't find the holes for the arms.

'I knew we shouldn't have given you that champagne last night,' she was nagging him as he was trying to negotiate the stairs.

'Hello, Jason, my lad.' Old Rennie's voice sounded reassuring on the phone. 'Sorry to disturb you this morning, but I've got some bad news.'

‘Don’t tell me they’ve cancelled the exhibition already,’ he half-joked, his mind still asleep.

‘No, worse. One of your pictures has been stolen.’

‘What?’ was all he could muster.

‘Afraid so. The cleaners noticed there was an empty frame on the wall when they came in this morning. Their first thought was it was some practical joke, but they found a couple of clips from the frame on the landing. It looks like whoever took it had to take the clips off the bottom, then eased the picture out of the frame, took it up to the landing, rolled it up, stuffed it under his coat and presumably walked out without anybody noticing. Security is very lax in that place, unfortunately. The gallery has apologised profusely.’

Jason couldn’t believe it. He had a horrible inkling which one it was. He dreaded asking the question. ‘Which one?’

‘The large one of the tiger.’

He might have guessed. ‘That’s my favourite.’

‘I know, Jason, I am very sorry, but the thing is, did you make a copy of it?’

‘My dad took a photo of it as he wanted it for himself.’

‘Well, I did notice one thing whilst I was hanging it up, and it’s a bit late now, but I don’t think it was signed. Just check with your father.’

He asked Mr Rennie to hang on, and went to find his dad, then returned to the phone with photos of all of his pictures. As he waded through them, he checked the rest were signed, then came to his tiger. It wasn’t, except for the title in the bottom left-hand corner.

‘No, you’re right,’ he answered. ‘I forgot to sign it. Does it make any difference?’

‘Well, don’t you see? All the rest are signed except that one. Now, I’ve spoken to the proprietor and he tells me there was one man who came in late last night, acting rather strangely. Judging by the description I think it was ...’

‘Eckenstein!’ Jason finished the sentence for him.

‘That’s right. Now obviously if he stole it, it was because there’s no signature and he’s probably going to sign it and pass it off as his own.’

Jason now realised that’s what the man was doing on the two separate occasions he saw him in the Town Hall, checking to see if any of his works had signatures. If he remembered rightly they all had, but surely he would have noticed that the first time. So why did he come back a second time? Unless it was to see if his signature could be erased or removed without damaging the picture.

‘What a sod,’ he swore to himself.

‘Jason, you still there?’

He could hear Mr Rennie on the phone but he wasn't listening to him; he was listening to his inner voice and the blood now boiling in his veins.

'Jason, you still there?' he repeated.

'Yes, I'm still here.'

'Good. Now I appreciate you're upset, but the thing is the gallery will be opening in about an hour and a half and we've got an empty frame hanging on the wall. Do you have another replacement we could put in it for the time being until we get the original back?'

'If we get the original back!'

'I think I know where Eckenstein lives so I shall have words with him. Leave that to me. Get on and find a replacement, then get down to the gallery as quick as you can. And don't forget to change the label by the side of the picture if it is significantly different.'

Old Rennie then hung up. Jason just stared at the phone in disbelief. He could blame himself for being so stupid as to forget to sign a bloody picture. What an idiot! Or he could change it in his head and say, 'Well, at least someone thought one of my pictures was worth stealing. After all, look what happened to the *Mona Lisa* in 1911. It was stolen off the walls of the Louvre in Paris.' Either way he put it, he was wasting time.

'Dad,' he shouted out.

'What is it, son?'

'Can you give me a lift to the gallery in about an hour?'

'Why? What's up?'

'I need to replace one of my paintings which has gone missing in the gallery.'

'Missing?' his mother asked, concerned.

'Well, stolen,' he replied. 'It's all right. Mr Rennie thinks he may be able to get it back.'

'Which one?' they both asked.

'My tiger. I've got an hour to draw another one.'

'You'll never be able to do the same thing in an hour, surely?' his dad countered.

'We'll see. But whatever you do don't knock on my door till I'm finished.'

Jason rushed upstairs, quickly rifled through all of the remaining pictures to check there was nothing remotely similar—there wasn't—then fetched the roll from under his bed, cut off a new sheet of paper about the same size as the original one, laid it out on the floor, grabbed his pencils and paused. How was he going to do it when he had no inspiration? He was inspired last time. Now he needed to somehow get it back. What would Spare do in this situation? There was only one solution.

He scribbled on a small piece of paper ‘I DESIRE THE POWER OF MY TIGER,’ sigilised it, memorised it, brought it up to his forehead—just like he did in the park with the rain—charged it and dropped it, then flung himself on his bed face up and closed his eyes, his mind becoming a vacuum.

Within seconds he could feel the power coming upon him, surging in his veins, energy pumping round his body, his face contorting, his body contracting, his fingers clutching at the sheets. He could feel it in his teeth; they started chattering away. He had to bite his lip to stop them, and grimaced as he felt his whole self sink into the creature.

‘Ugh!’ he wanted to scream, until he could take no more. Quickly, he drew it up to the surface and threw it out, scrambling to the paper as it started pouring out, his pencil working at a frenzied pace all over the sheet as if he was possessed by some mad demon trying to get out, until finally he felt fully exorcised, empty.

When he regained his composure he opened his eyes, and was astonished. Not only had he managed to reproduce it, this version was far better, infinitely superior, he thought, because it was pure energy, primal and instinctual, and he loved it.

‘You ready, Dad?’ he asked him, coming down the stairs, now fully dressed.

‘Don’t tell me you finished it?’ he asked, incredulous.

Jason just waved the roll of paper and slung it under his arm and was halfway out of the door, with his bewildered father trailing behind him.

Sitting in the passenger seat in the front, he let his dad catch a glimpse of his new piece.

‘Cool. Don’t forget to sign it, will you, son,’ he reminded him.

‘Not this time, I won’t.’

Jason signed it in the car, complete with the same title. His father dropped him off at the gallery just as it was opening, then drove off, waving goodbye.

Luckily, no one had arrived yet. The proprietor profusely apologised again for what he called a ‘mishap,’ but was then staggered to find Jason had managed to retrieve the stolen item already.

He explained to him this one was merely a copy done in haste and will have to do until the original was returned, then went over to mount it in the empty frame.

‘But when did you do the copy?’

‘Oh, this morning,’ he replied with a smirk, knowing the man wouldn’t believe him.

They stood back to have a good look at it. Even the proprietor had to agree it was better, and was surprisingly about the same size.

Jason then explained to the man he was going to stick around and wait for Mr Rennie to show up, hopefully with the original drawing.

Mr Rennie did eventually turn up but alas empty-handed. He was greeted by the proprietor, again full of apologies, who assured him it will never happen again. But at least the frame was now no longer empty.

Mr Rennie did not believe his ears, and was taken round to the side room to view the restored frame. Inside was something even he could not deny was an improvement.

‘Well, Mr Rennie,’ the boy started to ask, ‘what do you think?’

‘It’s magnificent. Now don’t tell me you did that this morning?’

‘Yep. I think the champagne from last night helped,’ he blurted, then covered his mouth. It slipped out, quite forgetting his promise to his parents to not mention the champagne.

Mr Rennie frowned at the boy. ‘Don’t make a habit of it, will you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Good. Now that the proprietor has gone we can speak in private. I managed to find that scoundrel Eckenstein. Woke him up in fact. He strongly denies any involvement with the theft, says he is “utterly innocent,” and “exonerated from all blame,” even denying coming here yesterday. Now, you know it was him, I know it was him, and unless we involve the police we will never get it back.’

‘I’ll get it back,’ the boy piped up.

‘How?’

‘Just leave it to me, sir.’

The teacher could all but frown at him again as he watched him walk out the door.

Back home Jason was making plans. Okay, he managed to do another one to replace the one that was stolen. But it cost him a lot of pain and effort. He certainly didn’t want to have to draw like that ever again. It hurt and left him feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. He then got to thinking about that ‘scoundrel Eckenstein,’ as Old Rennie called him. Was Jason justified in exacting retribution for what the man had done to him? They say that revenge is a form of retrogressive suicide, for one ultimately burns oneself after the culprit has been burned. Nor did he believe cursing was justified either. Even if he knew how to curse properly, there was no physical link he could use to connect him to the victim. He thought the best thing to do was to frighten him, to put the man in such a state of alarm that he would be forced to return the stolen item. But how? He didn’t know where the man lived, for a start, unless he asked Old Rennie for his address. Then what was he going to do? Knock on his door and go ‘Boo!’ when he opened it. Somehow, he didn’t think that would work.

Also, he wasn't even sure if he could remember what Eckenstein looked like. He had some vague recollection, but nothing solid. It would help if he could form an image in his head, of something like him. That would be a step in the right direction. To do it, he would have to do what artists do: he drew.

He put a clean sheet on his easel, picked up a charcoal, and let his hand do the work, trying to visualise the man as he saw him on those two separate occasions, each one of which he was wearing the same jacket, a horrible black thing that went down to his knees, like the Jews wear, with its wide lapels. Then the thick mop of black hair, untidy as if it hadn't seen a comb for weeks. The two beady eyes which seemed to squint. And that hooked nose of his you could hang a coat on.



When Jason finished he stood back and took a good look. It was a gross exaggeration, more of a caricature really, but as far as he was concerned, that was Eckenstein. Then for some reason he picked up his charcoal again, listening intently to his inner voice. He started to sketch in a black shape creeping up on the man from behind, with Eckenstein as this crooked figure shambling along some damp and seedy alleyway, his beady eyes swivelling around like a chameleon's looking for something else to steal. Then Jason found himself changing the black shape into a tiger, claws drawn, mouth wide open, fangs visible, rearing up as if ready to pounce on the man from behind and bite his head off in one fell swoop. As he toyed with this idea, not really aware of where these things were coming from—possibly the right side of his brain—he began to draw his missing picture lying flat on the ground beneath the tiger's hind legs so it looked as if the tiger was leaping out of his original drawing, which presumably was still in Eckenstein's possession. Jason loved the

idea; what should have been just a mnemonic to help him remember was now turning into a fully blown sketch, even signing it in the bottom right-hand corner.

As he was putting the finishing touches to the sketch, he was reminded of photographs he had seen of wall paintings where primitive tribes would paint pictures of themselves on the walls hunting deer, bison, or whatever animal it was they were hoping to catch. It was believed the reason behind this was magical, that it would make the hunt more successful. Was this picture, he got to thinking, any different?

He put down his charcoal and stood back to admire the finished product. It was perfect. It was all he needed to work on. The image encapsulated everything about the whole situation: detestable Eckenstein creeping into the gallery, surreptitiously taking his drawing, creeping away furtively, and then denying his involvement. Well, if he wants it, he's going to get it, Jason thought to himself. The stupid man was going to be attacked by the very picture he had stolen, with a little help from Jason's power animal. It was ingenious. All he had to do was bring up his desire again, but instead of sinking into it and becoming one with the power, he was going to repress it and let it out on Eckenstein instead, in the same way that he became a cat in his dream.

Since it could only work by repression he was going to have to forget the whole thing afterwards. He positioned the easel at an angle to the door so that when he returned to his room the first thing he saw was his sketch. This would trigger off a response, then he would throw himself into bed, fall sleep, allowing his dreaming mind to do the rest.

He wrote down his desire, the same as in the morning, sigilised it, and went to the bathroom, making sure he closed his bedroom door behind him. He put the toilet lid down, sat on it, took a good look at the sigil, memorised it, closed his eyes and charged it, then dropped it, flushing the sigil down the toilet and went downstairs for tea.

'Mum, is it okay if I stay up late tonight?' he asked between taking mouthfuls.

'I don't see why not. But you had better ask your father.'

'Dad?'

'Yes, son?' he responded knowing full well what he was going to ask.

'Can I stay up late tonight?'

'I suppose I might let you. Is there any specific reason?'

'It is Christmas Eve tomorrow. There might be a good film on telly tonight.'

'Okay, son. But none of your funny stuff tonight. And definitely no champagne,' he laughed.

'Thanks, Dad.'

Jason wasn't quite sure what his dad meant by 'funny stuff' and didn't even want to analyse it in case it sparked off something he had to forget. All he knew it was vital to stay up late as possible tonight for it to work; again he wasn't quite sure what 'it' was.

He put it out of his mind, forgot all about the day, and everything else that had happened, and sat down on the comfy sofa and watched TV. In a way, television was also a godsend because it made you forget about things, like school, work, financial problems, relationships that weren't working, etc. He could understand why so many people were glued to their screens each night, yet it was a vicarious form of living, allowing these people on-screen to live our lives for us, with too many people addicted to soaps. It was no wonder it was called 'the opium of the people;' it kept them sedated. And like everybody else, Jason was watching it to forget.

After three to four hours of rubbish, Jason found his eyes were automatically closing, as if his eyelids were too heavy to keep open. He started yawning and stretching. His dad suggested it was time for bed. He kissed his dad goodnight, and his mother who wished him a good night's sleep and sweet dreams, and wearily made his way up the stairs. He opened his bedroom door and turned the light on. Then it hit him, and it all came flooding back.

Quickly he turned the light off and jumped into bed, desperately trying to fall asleep. He couldn't. He was swimming in the sea; one minute he was above the surface, the next he was under, with big waves rolling in pushing him down. He was then thrown back up as the waves receded, bobbing up and down, just like Eckenstein's head in the exhibition, up and down, up and down, being taken under, then thrown back up again. His only life line was his sketch. He clung on to it like a lifebuoy ring in his head until he was taken down again and never came back up.

Jason started to have the weirdest of dreams. He was back as a cat, but this time a tiger in a cage, just like the one he saw at the circus, the one which refused to go back in its cage. He was pounding up and down this cage, going from one end to the other looking for a gap in the bars, one large enough to squeeze through, and when he found one he slipped through and took one massive leap to find he was now on someone's bed in the dark. He growled and roared. The man in the bed turned over to find two dripping fangs hovering above his face and these huge eyes of fire burning into his. He jumped out of bed panicking, running round the room as the tiger chased after him and trapped him in a corner. The man then picked up a broom and was bashing it against the tiger's head in defence, shouting, 'No, get away from me, get away from me,' with the

creature trying to claw him and scratch him until the man hit him so hard with the broom it was forced to retreat and leapt into a drawing lying on the floor.

Suddenly Jason woke up clutching his chest, his heart pounding like a tom-tom, and found himself back in bed. He turned the bedside light on, relieved it was all over. Seeing his room, his bed, Austin lying at the end of it giving him a queer look as if to say, 'You woke me up!' reassured him he was back in the real world. He apologised to Austin and went back to sleep.

In the morning he became aware someone was prodding him, trying to get him to wake up. It was like he was back in his dream again, and he was trying to fight off the broom, even raising his hands in self-defence.

'Jason, come on wake up,' he could hear his mother shouting.

Jason opened his eyes, shook his head, stretched and yawned, and found his mother sitting on his bed.

'It's that man again, that Mr Rennie,' she was telling him. 'He's on the phone.'

He struggled to comprehend what she was saying.

'Come on, wake up, Jason,' she started nagging him. 'Quickly.'

He clambered down the stairs and found the phone, not even sure in his half-asleep state who was on the other end, and simply said 'Hello,' struggling to get the word out.

'Morning, Jason,' Mr Rennie's familiar voice came through. 'Sorry to wake you, but I thought you may want to hear the good news.'

'News?' he asked, wiping his eyes and yawning.

'Your picture, the one of the tiger that was stolen. Guess what? It has been returned. The cleaners found it when they came in to work this morning. It had been shoved through the letterbox. Slightly damaged round the edges, I'm afraid. But at least we've got it back. That Eckenstein must have panicked. Got a guilty conscience or something, and thought he would be better off without it. I haven't seen the state of it myself, except what I've been told over the phone, but I would think it's useless now. Beside there's a better one in its place. What do you want to do with it?'

'I'm not sure. They can keep it. No, better still. I did promise my dad he could have it so I'll get him to pick it up.'

'Good, that's settled then. But don't forget, the gallery is closed for Christmas and Boxing Day, so it will have to be either today or Monday.'

'Okay, I'll tell him.'

'I don't know what you did, but you will have to tell me one day.'

Jason wasn't even sure himself. What did he do?

‘Oh, Jason?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘One more thing. Merry Christmas.’

‘Merry Christmas, sir.’

When Jason returned to his room, he really wanted to go back to sleep. It was only about nine o’clock, but for him it felt like six. He had this god-awful dream, couldn’t remember all the details, and sat on his bed trying to recover parts of it, his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes, and swung round to the other side of his bed to look out the window. When he looked up, there it was right in front of him: his sketch from last night.

His mother must have moved his easel when she came in to his room to wake him. There was a cup of coffee by his bed she left for him. He picked it up, took one sip, looked at his sketch, remembered exactly what he did in his dream and said: ‘If I can do that, I can do anything.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘Pleased to be back?’ his old teacher asked him.

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ Jason replied. ‘Put it this way, I can’t wait to get to the end of this academic year so I can move on.’

‘I understand,’ Mr Rennie empathised. ‘But you still have this and three more terms to go before we even get to the summer holidays. Now, I know you are impatient and you want to get on. You are a smart young boy, your academic ability is way above average for your age and you feel that the other boys in your class are holding you back. But what can we do about it? Mr Ridicott thinks you ought to be moved to the next level immediately as quite clearly you are wasting your time being in this year’s class. It will mean, however, you mixing with older boys. Would you have any objection to that?’

‘Of course not, sir.’

‘Good. Then I will speak to Mr Ridicott. He will speak to Mr Martin who in turn will have to speak to your parents and get their permission to have you promoted to the next level.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘With any luck, my lad, they will be glad to have such a gifted, talented boy like you as their own. I don’t see any reason why they should object. Once they give the go-ahead, you will probably have to sit the placements earlier than usual to see if you are indeed capable. And I have personally recommended that you sit not this year’s exams, but next year’s. Do you think you’re up to it?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ He paused momentarily to allow himself time to frame his next line. Mr Rennie’s business attitude relaxed and he gave

a more personable smile suggesting he was no longer a teacher, more of a friend now, or perhaps even a confidant. 'I doubt if you will answer this next question directly, but we can speak in private. What you say next will not go beyond the walls of my study. Are we clear?'

The boy did not need to look around to see if there were any other ears listening. The door was closed firmly behind him and he knew no one else would hear. He nodded to Old Rennie sitting on the other side of his desk.

'Good. What happened with Eckenstein?'

'I don't know, sir,' he replied shrugging his shoulders as if protesting his innocence.

'You must have done something. There is no reason why Eckenstein would replace something he thought he could pass off as his own. I mean, he had to wait months for that exhibition to start, go there, find there's a drawing which has not only been unsigned but also looks just like one of Spare's works, then get up the nerve to steal the bloody thing, and walk out with it hoping nobody would notice. The next day he returns it first thing. Very strange. Now don't tell me you had nothing to do with its return.'

'Well, sir, put it this way. I did put the frighteners on him, from a distance, of course.'

'That's what I thought. Now my worry is, you could use this power of yours on anybody who crosses you or gets in your way. Who knows, you might even use it on me.'

'Oh no, I would never do that, sir.'

'Good. But don't make a habit of it, please. In some cases there could be dire consequences, and you don't want to ruin your whole future all because you had a bone to pick with somebody or they rubbed you up the wrong way.'

'I won't, sir. Honest.'

'Glad to hear it. Now,' he said, changing tack, 'about your next exhibition in the summer ... Oh, I take it you did get all of the last exhibits back?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good, because we may use some of them in the next one.'

'Even my *Chinese Cat*?' the boy asked, with a smirk.

'No, I thought we might do something else with that one, and it's not really representative of your oeuvre, is it?'

'Do what, sir?'

'Make a generous offer.'

'An offer, sir?'

'Yes. The local children's hospital is doing a fund-raising auction

next month. They are desperately trying to raise half a million pounds. Now, I thought it would be a good philanthropic gesture on your part to donate the picture to their cause. It will have your name attached to it, thus help your profile as an artist and as a member of this community, and should raise, according to the feedback we got from the gallery, and from some very interested parties, a considerable sum, say something in the region of £50,000. Now, that would be a rather magnanimous gift, don't you think?'

'And it also means whoever buys it will probably store it away privately so you'll never have to look at it again.'

'Come, come, my lad.'

'You've never been keen on that picture, so there's no point in trying to disguise the fact. But very well. If you think it will do me some good, then I'll donate it.'

'Good. That makes me very happy. And it should make you too. Especially if it goes above the asking price.'

'I might just be able to help there.'

'No, my lad. I'd rather you didn't interfere. Just let nature take its course, without any aid from you. We want a genuine value, not a fixed one. Then we can use that selling price as a benchmark for your other paintings. I take it you have done some more?'

'Loads, sir. All over the Christmas holiday.'

'Good, that's what I thought. We will add those to the next exhibition. You get on and design another cover for the new brochure, pass all your forthcoming exams, which I am sure you will, and keep your head down for the rest of the year.'

'Yes, sir.'

The two smiled at each other. It was a reciprocal smile as if they were both on the same wavelength; they understood each other perfectly. The man and the boy sat in silence for a good few minutes. It was not an awkward, unfriendly silence, but rather one of mutual understanding, tolerance, respect and comradeship.

'So, my lad,' his old teacher broke the silence, 'what do you intend to do now you've got all this power?'

The boy looked down. 'I don't know, sir.'

'Have you ever thought about becoming a politician?'

Jason looked up and smiled.

